Université de Liège
Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département de Langues modernes : littérature, linguistique, traduction

Giving voice to the silenced

Identity negotiation among second-generation Kurdish Londoners

Mémoire présenté par Helin YALCIN
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Promoteur : Raymond ETCHICHI

Abstract

This thesis examines how second-generation Kurds in London negotiate their identities and how these negotiations are reflected in their bilingualism. While Kurdishness has long been marginalised and silenced in the homeland, diasporic spaces such as London provide new opportunities for its rearticulation in relation to Britishness. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, the study analyses identity formation through the lenses of acculturation (Berry 1997), biculturalism (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos 2005; Phinney et al. 2001), and sociolinguistic research on bilingualism in diaspora (Luk 2022; Grosjean 2010). The findings reveal three broad orientations: Kurdish-oriented, British-oriented, and dual or hybrid identities. These orientations are fluid, continually negotiated and reshaped by intergenerational memory, community engagement, and the multicultural environment of London. Language emerges as a key site of negotiation: Kurmancî anchors heritage and affective belonging, while English dominates daily life and facilitates integration into British society. Patterns of language use mirror identity alignments: participants exhibit varied language practices, from purism to hybrid code-switching. By foregrounding the voices of second-generation Kurds, the study demonstrates how identity is constantly reshaped and takes different forms across contexts, reflecting heritage, community, and diasporic belonging. It further contributes to understandings of how minority identities are reconfigured in multicultural contexts, highlighting the role of bilingual practices in bringing silenced identities into speech.

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Destê dayika xwe li ser serê xwe dijîm.

Spas, dayê.

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To my mother who once shared with me a famous Kurdish riddle:

"Tişteki min heye, her derê derbas dibe, ew çi ye?"

[I have something that goes through everything, what is it?]

1. Introduction

Identity is never static. It is a dynamic, socially constructed process, shaped by heritage, environment, and interaction (Anthias 2002; Brah 2005; Hall 1990). Rather than existing in isolation, identities take form through the ordinary actions and relationships of daily life, continually reshaped "on the ground" in response to shifting contexts (Fearon & Laitin 2000). This negotiation becomes especially visible in multilingual and diasporic settings, where the coexistence of different cultural frames requires individuals to balance inherited traditions with the pressures and opportunities of their present surroundings. For children of migrants, identity often forms at this intersection: they may feel rooted in ancestral heritage while simultaneously shaped by the norms of the society in which they grow up.

For groups whose identities have been historically marginalised or silenced, these negotiations take on heightened significance. Marginalised identities often demand conscious affirmation, particularly when language, culture, or even existence itself has been denied recognition in the homeland. In such cases, diaspora becomes not only a space of refuge but also of reinvention, where suppressed identities can be voiced more openly. Yet diasporic contexts are also fraught with tensions: communities may find themselves caught between preservation and assimilation. Scholars have noted that diasporas can act as both "peace-makers" and "peace-wreckers," sometimes fostering solidarity and renewal, while at other times amplifying divisions or conflicts (Smith & Stares 2007; Natali 2005: 8). These ambivalences highlight the importance of examining not only what identities are carried into diaspora, but also how they are reshaped within it.

The Kurds illustrate this dynamic acutely. As the world's largest stateless nation, Kurds have faced systematic attempts at assimilation and erasure across the four main states where they live—Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria—leaving Kurdish identity politically stigmatised and culturally marginalised. Among the most enduring dimensions of this marginalisation has been the suppression of the Kurdish language. Through language planning and policies of assimilation, dominant national languages were positioned as legitimate markers of citizenship, while Kurdish was relegated to the private sphere or banned outright. This historical silencing of Kurdishness has given language an especially symbolic role in the construction of identity.

Migration and exile have created transnational Kurdish communities in Europe, North America, and beyond. In these diasporic contexts, Kurdishness has become a site of cultural activism, political mobilisation, and identity preservation. London stands out as a hub for the Kurdish diaspora in Britain, home to diverse Kurdish groups from Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Within this urban and multicultural environment, Kurdishness is rearticulated in relation to Britishness and the broader diasporic condition. The second generation, in particular, occupies a distinctive position: they inherit memories of repression and exile from their parents while simultaneously navigating the norms of British society. For them, identity is not simply a matter of preserving a past but of reconciling heritage with present realities. Seen in this light, Kurdishness and Britishness are not mutually exclusive categories but resources that individuals draw upon in different ways, with identity continually reconfigured across contexts.

Language is central to this negotiation. Scholars of bilingualism and diaspora emphasise that it functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic anchor of belonging (Fishman 1991; Grosjean 2014). For second-generation Kurds in London, the interplay between Kurdish and English encapsulates the broader dynamics of identity: Kurdish often evokes affective ties, heritage, and resistance, while English mediates education, social life, and integration into British society. Patterns of bilingual use reflect how individuals balance heritage and host cultural orientations (Berry 1997; Phinney et al. 2001). Crucially, language does not simply mirror identity but actively shapes and performs it. Heritage speakers may show asymmetrical competence, restricted domains of use, or structural simplifications, yet such practices are not merely signs of decline; they can also serve as symbolic resources through which identity is enacted and negotiated (Auer 1998; Gumperz 1971).

This study situates itself within that nexus. Research on Kurdish identity has predominantly centred on the homeland, emphasising repression, nationalism, and political mobilisation (Hassanpour 1992). Kurds in Turkey, in particular, have been the focus of research on the "Kurdish Question" (Barkey & Fuller 1998; Kirişci & Winrow 1997; Yavuz & Özcan 2006; Yegen 1999) and on the evolution of Kurdish nationalism (Entessar 1992; Natali 2005; Olson 1989; Sarigil & Fazlioglu 2014; van Bruinessen 2000; Yavuz 2001). Studies of the diaspora, meanwhile, have explored belonging, discrimination, and transnational activism, but the emphasis has often been on first-generation migrants (Alinia 2004; Eliassi 2013; Wahlbeck 1999). The second generation has received comparatively little attention, despite the fact that they inherit a marginalised identity without having directly experienced repression in the homeland. The diversity of their experiences of Kurdishness therefore remains underexplored.

This thesis addresses this gap by examining how second-generation Kurds in London negotiate their identities and how these negotiations are reflected in their bilingualism. It focuses particularly on Kurmancî, the most widely spoken Kurdish variety (Hassanpour 1995), which, despite its widespread use, has often been discussed primarily in historical and political terms rather than through the lived experiences of younger speakers. By foregrounding the voices of second-generation Kurds, this study sheds light on how inherited memories, community practices, and urban multiculturalism interact in the making of diasporic identity.

The research draws on semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, all second-generation Kurds living in London. The interviews explored themes of identity, language, community, and belonging, enabling participants to reflect on their lived experiences. The analysis combines a thematic approach to identity narratives with close attention to linguistic features such as borrowing, transfer, and code-switching. This dual focus reflects the conviction that identity and language are inseparable dimensions of diasporic experience: language is both a mirror and a medium of the way individuals position themselves, i.e. a site where Kurdishness and Britishness intersect, conflict, and co-exist.

The thesis is structured as follows. Section 2 situates Kurdishness within its historical and political context, focusing on fragmentation across the Middle East and the silencing of Kurdish language and culture, before turning to the Kurdish diaspora and the case of Kurds in the UK. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on research on identity, acculturation, and bilingualism in diaspora. Section 4 details the methodology, including participant recruitment, interview design, and analytical approach. Section 5 presents the findings and discussion, organised around themes of identity negotiation and bilingual practice. Section 6 concludes the study, reflecting on its contributions and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Fragmentation and resistance: Kurdish historical and sociolinguistic context

Understanding the contemporary experiences of second-generation Kurds in the UK requires situating them within the broader historical and political processes that have shaped Kurdishness across time and space (Geerse 2011: 383). Kurdish identity has been defined by a persistent condition of statelessness, repeated episodes of forced assimilation, and enduring geopolitical fragmentation. Kurds are divided across four principal nation-states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—each of which has pursued distinct, though often overlapping, policies of suppression, co-optation, and marginalisation. These state-led strategies have profoundly influenced the political, cultural, and linguistic development of Kurdish communities, leaving lasting effects on

intergenerational language transmission, collective memory, and patterns of self-identification. In the face of such pressures, Kurdish communities have engaged in sustained forms of resistance—linguistic, cultural, and political—both within the Middle East and in diaspora. The resilience of Kurdish identity thus cannot be separated from the histories of its repression.

Section 2 offers a historical and sociolinguistic overview of Kurdish identity across the different national contexts in which Kurds have lived (Section 2.1), before turning to the experiences of the diaspora (Section 2.2), with particular attention to the UK as the focus of this study.

2.1. Kurdishness across borders: A fragmented and invisible identity

Estimates of the global Kurdish population vary due to the absence of reliable census data, but most sources place it between 30 and 35 million people (Edmonds 2012: 2; Karataş 2022: 62; Sedeeq 2017: 16). Despite this demographic scale, Kurds lack an independent state and remain politically unrecognised as a collective nation—making them one of the largest stateless peoples in the world (Wahlbeck 1998; Alinia 2004; Kaya 2012; Uğurlu 2014; Arslan 2015: 16). Their political invisibility has been shaped by the fragmentation of their historical homeland across the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. In contemporary Kurdish discourse, the term "Kurdistan" is often used informally to describe Kurdish-majority regions within these four states. These regions are commonly referred to in Kurmancî by directional names: Bakur (North, in Turkey), Bashur (South, in Iraq), Rojhilat (East, in Iran), and Rojava (West, in Syria) (Hasanpour 1999: 9; O'Leary 2002: 17).

Kurdistan has been inhabited by Kurdish communities since at least 3000 BCE[1] and was united by shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties (Mirawdali 1993: 15). This unity was fractured with the rise of the modern nation-states, a process cemented by the Sykes–Picot Agreement of World War I and the subsequent Treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne (Alinia 2004; Eskander 2014). While Sèvres (1920) briefly envisaged Kurdish autonomy, Lausanne (1923) recognised the new Turkish Republic and omitted any provision for self-determination (O'Leary 2002: 17; Sedeeq 2017). The result was the permanent division of Kurds across four states, each pursuing assimilationist policies and denying Kurdish political and cultural recognition.

Since then, Kurdish history has been characterised by recurring cycles of suppression and resistance (Sedeeq 2017). Although the specific forms of repression have varied, a common feature

[1] This overview provides only a brief account of developments from the twentieth century onwards. For more detailed discussions of Kurdish history, see Hamarash (2022) and McDowall (2004).

has been the unequal centre–periphery relationship (Nagel 2001), in which Kurdish regions are politically marginalised and economically underdeveloped relative to dominant national centres. Alinia (2004: 48) interprets this as a form of internal colonialism, whereby Kurdish areas have been systematically subjected to socio-economic exclusion and cultural repression. This marginalisation has also prompted what Entessar (1992: 6) terms "reactive subsystems": grassroots mechanisms of cultural preservation and political resistance that have, paradoxically, strengthened Kurdish ethnic consciousness over time.

Thus, Kurdish identity has historically evolved not only in opposition to state-led repression, but also through the everyday practices of resistance that arise under such conditions. Yet because these experiences have unfolded within distinct state structures, Kurdishness has not been uniform. Instead, it constitutes a fragmented identity landscape in which belonging, political consciousness, and language use differ significantly across national contexts.

Iraq: **Başûrê Kurdistan**

Among the four states in which Kurds are dispersed, Iraq presents a distinct case: it is the only one to have granted a constitutionally recognised Kurdish region. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) operates in with its own president, parliament, security forces, and foreign representations (Skutnabb-Kangas, Sheyholislami & Hassanpour 1995: 181), making it a rare example of partial institutional accommodation of Kurdish self-rule.

This status followed decades of marginalisation (Jwaideh 2006). From its incorporation into the new Iraqi state under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy were subsumed under a framework dominated by Arab nationalism (Entessar 1992; Wahlbeck 1999; Chaliand 1994; Sedeeq 2017). Repression reached its most violent expression under Saddam Hussein, particularly during the 1988 Anfal campaign, which involved mass killings, chemical attacks, and the destruction of thousands of villages, culminating in the Halabja massacre (Wahlbeck 1992: 52). These events left deep psychological scars and widespread physical devastation in Bashur, shaping collective memory and political mobilisation in the region (Jabar & Dawod 2007).

The aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War marked a turning point: the establishment of a Western-enforced no-fly zone over the Kurdish-majority north prevented further aerial attacks by Iraqi forces, enabling their withdrawal from the region (Wahlbeck 1999). This created the conditions for a de facto Kurdish administration to emerge, laying the groundwork for what would later become the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Entessar 1992: 75). The 2003 U.S.-led invasion

accelerated Kurdish political consolidation, and the 2005 Iraqi constitution formally recognised the KRI as a federal entity. While the region has since expanded its diplomatic and economic presence, its autonomy remains precarious, constrained by disputes with Baghdad over oil revenues, territorial boundaries, and the limits of federalism (Sedeeq 2017). Iraq thus illustrates both the most institutionalised expression of Kurdish identity and the enduring fragility of such recognition within contested state structures (Jabar & Dawod 2007).

Iran: **Rojhilatê Kurdistanê**

In Iran, Kurdish regions have long been incorporated into a centralised state while remaining politically and culturally marginalised (Alinia 2004). The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–06 created a modern citizenship framework but entrenched Persian language and culture as the core of national identity, relegating Kurdish to a subordinate status (Vali 1998). Kurdish provinces were placed under direct central control, with local leaders co-opted into administrative roles to limit broader mobilisation and impede the emergence of a unified Kurdish national movement (Wahlbeck 1999).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution initially raised hopes among ethnic minorities for greater recognition and autonomy (Entessar 1992), but the consolidation of the Islamic Republic under a Shi'a framework quickly suppressed Kurdish demands. Autonomy movements were met with violent repression, militarisation, and administrative restructuring, reinforcing entrenched centre–periphery inequalities (Chaliand 1994; Wahlbeck 1999).

By the late twentieth century, most organised Kurdish political activity had been forced into exile (Wahlbeck 1999: 57). Within Iran, Kurdish identity remained institutionally invisible, constrained by repression and the absence of legal avenues for cultural or linguistic rights. As Alinia (2004) notes, this reflects a form of "internal colonialism," in which state incorporation is coupled with systemic exclusion in political and cultural life.

The Iranian case demonstrates how Kurdish identity can be both historically embedded within a state and structurally marginalised by it. The long-term privileging of a singular, Persian-centred national culture has fragmented Kurdish political unity, eroded prospects for institutional recognition, and left Kurdishness in Iran reliant on informal, localised, and often clandestine modes of expression (Karim 1996).

Syria: **Rojavayê Kurdistanê**

In Syria, Kurdish communities have long faced political and legal erasure, despite centuries of residence in the region (Sedeeq 2017: 19). Successive governments have denied Kurds recognition as a distinct ethnic group, framing all citizens as part of a singular Arab nation (Jwaideh 1993).

After independence in 1946, relations between the Syrian state and its Kurdish population were relatively low in tension. This changed with the rise of pan-Arab nationalism and the consolidation of Ba'athist rule in the 1960s. In 1962, a special census in the Jezireh region stripped more than 100,000 Kurds of citizenship, reclassifying them as "foreigners" and excluding them from basic civil rights (Hamarash 2022).

The late 1960s brought further assimilationist measures through the Arab Belt policy, which displaced Kurdish communities along the Turkish border, resettled Arab families in state-built "model villages," and confiscated Kurdish agricultural land. Kurdish was banned in schools and public administration, while official historiography erased Kurdish history and identity (Kreyenbroeck 1992). Unlike Iraq, which later granted constitutional autonomy, or Iran, which maintained formal minority inclusion, Syria offered no legal framework for Kurdish cultural or political expression—making it one of the starkest examples of enforced invisibility (Hamarash 2022).

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 radically altered this landscape. As state forces withdrew from the north-east, Kurdish-led administrations—most prominently under the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—established de facto self-governance in the region widely known as Rojava (Balancar 2018). While this created unprecedented space for Kurdish political and cultural assertion, it emerged under exceptional wartime conditions and remains contested both domestically and internationally (Hamarash 2022).

The Syrian case thus illustrates how Kurdish identity can be territorially entrenched yet politically erased, and how sudden geopolitical ruptures may open only temporary spaces for recognition.

Turkey: **Bakurê Kurdistanê**

Of the four nation-states where Kurds reside, Turkey has arguably pursued the most sustained and systematic campaign of denial, assimilation, and repression (Arslan 2015: 24).

Founded in 1923, the modern Turkish Republic sought to replace the multi-ethnic legacy of the Ottoman Empire with a secular, unitary, and homogenous national identity (cf. "Turkification,"

see Zeydanlıoğlu 2012; Alinia 2004; Cagaptay 2006; Yegen 1999). The 1924 Constitution recognised only non-Muslims as minorities, subsuming all others under the civic label "Turk" (Article 88, see Arslan 2015). In practice, this definition masked an ethnic project: Turkishness was equated with linguistic, cultural, and political conformity (Aydıngün & Aydıngün 2004), erasing Kurdish identity from political, legal, and cultural life.

Nation-building combined coercion with physical and symbolic violence (Fairclough 1989: 33). Early uprisings—such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925) and the Dersim Uprising (1937–1938)—were met with extreme violence, including mass killings, deportations, and village destruction (van Bruinessen 1994; Beşikçi 1990). Resettlement laws and the 1935 Tunceli Law framed these measures as a "civilising" mission to integrate Kurdish regions into Turkish modernity (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008; Cagaptay 2006).

This was reinforced by what Bourdieu (1990) calls "symbolic violence": the imposition of dominant norms that delegitimise others. Kurdish was banned in education, media, and public administration, place names were changed, official discourse recast Kurds as "mountain Turks," and official historiography erased Kurdish history and identity (Haig 2004; Irvine & Gal 2000; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012). Naming Kurdishness was treated as sedition (Amnesty International). The 1982 Constitution preserved the rhetoric of civic inclusion—"every individual who is bound to the Turkish State by ties of citizenship is a Turk" (Arslan 2015: 37)—but in practice reinforced monocultural nationalism (Loizides 2010; Yegen 1999).

The early 2000s saw a rhetorical shift under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which promoted "conservative democracy" and introduced symbolic reforms such as Kurdish-language broadcasting and partial cultural recognition. Yet these changes were undermined by ongoing securitisation, repression of political activism, and persistent framing of Kurdishness as a separatist threat (Aras 2014).

Despite changes in leadership and discourse, the underlying mechanisms regulating Kurdish identity—assimilation, denial, and securitisation—have remained remarkably consistent. Language policy, in particular, has been central to this project, functioning not merely as a restriction on expression but as a strategic tool for rendering Kurdish identity invisible. The following section examines this process in greater detail, tracing how linguistic erasure has shaped the making and unmaking of Kurdishness in Turkey.

2.1.1. Silencing identity: The linguistic erasure of Kurmancî

The political division of the Kurdish people across four states is reflected in the fragmentation of their language. Kurdish is not a single, standardised language but a continuum of related varieties (Edmonds 2012). Scholars usually distinguish three major groups: Kurmancî (Northern Kurdish), Soranî (Central Kurdish), and Hawramî (also called Goranî or Pehlewanî, Southern Kurdish) (Nabaz 1976: 15; Mirawdali 1993: 23; Hasanpour 1999: 36). Although these varieties share historical roots, they differ in grammar, phonology, and script, and are generally not mutually intelligible. The decision to label them "dialects" rather than distinct languages reflects political rather than linguistic considerations (Billig 1997; Calvet 2002), framing Kurdish as a unified language community despite its internal diversity (cf. "associated languages," Eastman & Reese 1981).

Of all the major varieties, only Soranî has achieved official recognition—becoming one of the official languages of the KRI in 1992, with rights further expanded after 2003 as the region's autonomy increased (Hassanpour 1995; Sheyholislami 2010). In Iran, Hawramî is tolerated in everyday life but remains subordinated to Persian (Alinia 2004: 58). In Syria, where Kurmancî predominates, the language was banned from public life until the 2011 civil war, when Kurmancî-led administrations in Rojava launched their own education initiatives (Massoud 2015).

Kurmancî is the most widely spoken Kurdish variety and a central marker of Kurdish identity (Hassanpour 1995: 50), valued for its role in oral tradition, poetry, and collective memory (Haig 2004; Alinia 2004; Castells 2004; Wodak et al. 2009). Precisely because of this "strong expression of antiquity and cultural continuity" (Mirawdali 1993: 21), it has faced sustained suppression—especially in Turkey, where the language became the primary target of state assimilation policies during the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Cagaptay 2006; Yegen 1999; Parla & Davison 2004: 71; Celebi, Verkuyten & Smyrnioti 2016). This thesis focuses on Bakurî Kurmancî, mainly spoken in Turkey, and examines how its historical erasure has shaped its sociolinguistic and symbolic status within the diaspora.

From Republican foundations to systematic bans

Language was central to the Kemalist nation-building project. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk repeatedly linked speaking Turkish with belonging to the nation, framing it as the repository of moral values and history (Aydıngün & Aydıngün 2004: 423; Virtanem 2003: 13). The 1924 Constitution made Turkish the sole official language (Article 2), casting the abandonment of one's mother tongue as loyalty, and its retention as defiance (Bayar 2011).

Education became the key instrument of assimilation. The 1924 Law on the Unification of Education abolished Kurmancî-medium schools and introduced a centralised, Turkish-language curriculum (Aydıngün & Aydıngün 2004: 426). The 1926 Eastern Reform Plan banned Kurmancî in courts, education, administration, and public spaces in much of eastern Turkey (Bayar 2011: 116). This centralised system disseminated what Gellner (2006) terms a "high culture"—a standardised, literate culture deliberately engineered from above as part of Turkey's project of modernisation and national homogenisation.

Symbolic measures reinforced this erasure (Yildiz & Fryer 2004: 22). The 1928 Language Reform replaced the Ottoman script with a Latin-based Turkish alphabet, breaking orthographic continuity with other Kurdish varieties (Wortham 1930: 188; Thackston 2006: ix; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012: 102; Yılmaz 2013). The ban on the letters Q, W, and X until 2013 epitomised this exclusion (Nezan 1993, cited in Zeydanlıoğlu 2012: 107), as did renaming the Kurdish New Year "Newroz" to "Nevruz," using only permitted Turkish letters (Yanik 2006: 285; Irvine & Gal 2000). Place and personal names were later Turkified under the 1934 Surname Law and other renaming campaigns such as "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" (Aslan 2007; Cagaptay 2006), which framed linguistic assimilation as a "civilising" mission (cf. "White Turkish Man's Burden" in Zeydanlıoğlu 2008; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012: 103). State-led renaming and standardisation act as tools of centralised control, erasing local histories and identities in the process (Scott 1998). From a linguistic perspective, Irvine and Gal's (2000) concept of iconisation shows how specific forms—such as letters—become emblematic of a social group; banning them thus works both as a practical mechanism of standardisation and as a symbolic act of identity suppression, erasing distinctive pronunciations and the cultural memory attached to them. The 1936 Sun Language Theory even claimed all languages derived from Turkish, dismissing Kurdish as a corrupted dialect (Hassanpour 1995: 133; Beşikçi 1977). Though discredited internationally (Aytürk 2004), the theory was taught in schools and reinforced nationalist myths of Turkish linguistic supremacy (Çolak 2004; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Keyman 2012).

Continuity after Atatürk

The suppression continued under new constitutions. The 1982 Constitution prohibited teaching any language "not recognised as the official language of a state recognised by Turkey," indirectly excluding Kurmancî (Haig 2004). Election laws banned campaigning in non-Turkish languages, enabling the state to deny Kurmancî even the status of a "language" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Hassanpour 1995).

EU accession talks in the early 2000s brought limited reforms: state-run Kurmancî broadcasting (TRT 6), university departments, and elective Kurmancî courses in middle schools (Bilgin, Ekici & Sezgin 2022: 326). Yet these were underfunded, heavily regulated, and did not lift the constitutional ban on Kurdish-medium education (Bozarslan 2003; Yildiz & Müller 2008; Öpengin 2012). By 2014, thousands of students who had opted for Kurdish electives could not take them due to a shortage of teachers or over trivial issues such as a classroom door being five centimetres too narrow (Tayanç & Karanfil 2012; Yöney 2012; O'Driscoll 2014: 280). Critics saw these as symbolic gestures that left Turkish dominance intact. The historical continuity from Atatürk's era lies in the enduring symbolic and legal framing of Kurmancî as a threat to national cohesion (Yildiz & Müller 2008).

Turkey's Kurmancî language policy has therefore been referred to as "linguicide" or "linguistic genocide"—the deliberate extermination of a language (Hassanpour 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak 1995; Hassanpour 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas 2010, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas & Taylor 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010). As Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak (1995: 362) observe, "[t]o kill a language you have to either kill the individuals speaking it or make these individuals change their mother tongue. Turkey tries to change the mother tongue of the Kurds and make Turkish their mother tongue." The systematic suppression of Kurdish—especially Kurmancî—thus constituted more than cultural marginalisation: it represented an existential assault on a core marker of Kurdish identity (Alinia 2004; Haig 2004). In this context, the politicisation of the language question was inevitable.

Politicisation and resistance

Kurdish nationalism developed without the foundation of a Kurdish state (Kaya 2012: 36). In the Middle East, the adoption of the nation-state model by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—together with the assimilationist policies that accompanied it—served as a catalyst for the emergence of Kurdish national consciousness (Vali 2003).

From the late 1970s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) promoted Kurmancî as a unifying variety (Gavrielides 1997; Keyman 2012; Balancar 2018) and central to constructing a "new Kurdish person" whose allegiance was to the nation rather than tribe or clan (Balancar 2018). Pro-Kurdish parties, from HEP (People's Labour Party) to the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), made language rights a central demand, even at the cost of state repression (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012). School boycotts, petitions to the European Court of Human Rights, and grassroots cultural initiatives sought to reclaim public space for Kurmancî (McDowall 2004; İnal 2012).

Persistent repression drove many Kurdish intellectuals, and ordinary citizens into exile, where the struggle for linguistic and cultural survival acquired new dimensions (Geerse 2011). A substantial "literary diaspora" in Europe, producing literature, media, and educational materials in Kurmancî (Scalbert-Yücel 2005). These transnational spaces became crucial for revitalising—and reimagining—the language, influencing how Kurdish identity is negotiated in the diaspora.

2.2. Kurdishness beyond borders: Identity in displacement

The sociopolitical marginalisation of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria has not only shaped life within those states but has also driven significant migration beyond their borders (Wahlbeck 1998). Movement abroad has functioned both as a response to acute repression and as a strategic means of safeguarding life, language, and cultural continuity (Geerse 2011: 18).

The first major wave of Kurdish migration in the 1960s consisted largely of labour migration from Turkey to Western Europe under bilateral guest-worker agreements, particularly to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and France (Kaya 2012: 156). From the 1970s onwards, political crises and state violence transformed primarily economic migration into politically charged exile. The 1971 military intervention and 1980 coup d'état in Turkey, the Anfal campaign in Iraq, and repression in Iran and Syria each triggered large-scale refugee flows (Kaya 2012: 156). By the early twenty-first century, sizeable Kurdish diaspora communities had formed across Europe, North America, and Australia.

Many in the diaspora have rejected the national identities imposed by their states of origin—Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, or Syrian—articulating instead a distinct Kurdish identity in exile . Scholars have debated the existence of a "centre of gravity" for the Kurdish diaspora (Khayati 2008; van Bruinessen 2000; Ahmadzadeh 2003), stating that "Kurdish nationalism, both cultural and political, having faced much harassment in Kurdistan, has found a golden situation in the diaspora from which to narrate its identity and construct a Kurdish imagined community" (Ahmadzadeh 2003: 164). Drawing on Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities, this identity is shaped through displacement, shared narratives of loss, and aspirations for recognition (Mokhabir 2016). In the twenty-first century, mobility, transnationalism, and digital connectivity (Mahmod 2019) have further enabled dispersed Kurds to create alternative maps of belonging that challenge state-controlled narratives (Griffiths 2002; Emanuelson 2005; Billig 1995; Sheikhmous 2000; van Bruinessen 1992; McDowall 2004: 3; Candan 2008: 130). As van Bruinessen (2000: 5) notes, "the awareness of Kurdistan as a homeland, and of Kurds as a distinct people, has often been strongest in those Kurds who lived elsewhere, among people of different languages and cultures. […] It was

exile that transformed Kurdistan from a vaguely defined geographical entity into a political ideal." Curtis (2005: 3) goes further, suggesting that "the Kurdish nation is unlikely to have even formed had its members never left Kurdistan."

Exile has provided freedoms unattainable in the homeland (McDowall 2004, Sheffer 1995, Hassanpour 1995, Ahmedzadeh 2003, Eliassi 2013, Alinia & Eliassi 2014). Kurdish activists abroad have engaged in what Anderson (1992) terms long-distance nationalism, lobbying host governments, engaging with international institutions, and publicising human rights abuses in their countries of origin (Kaya 2012: 149). Community organisations, founded in the late 1970s, united dozens of local and national associations (McDowall 2004). These bodies promoted cultural revival alongside political mobilisation, often prioritising language work. Much of the modern Kurdish literary corpus—particularly in Kurmancî—was produced in exile, supported by greater freedom of expression, host-state funding, and intellectual exchange within migrant networks (van Bruinessen 2000). Diaspora-based initiatives standardised the Latin-based Hawar alphabet, developed Kurmancî teaching curricula, and established community-run language classes (Scalbert-Yücel 2005).

The diaspora, however, is far from homogeneous. Affiliations are often shaped by region of origin—Bakur, Bashur, Rojhilat, or Rojava—as well as by dialectal and political divisions (Kaya 2012: 165). Many communities remain tied to nationalist movements specific to their regions, which can complicate broader unity.

The Kurdish diaspora thus occupies a paradoxical position: it is a product of repression and displacement, yet also a crucible for cultural revival, political innovation, and transnational solidarity. Through publishing, education, lobbying, and activism, diasporic actors have transformed Kurdishness from a marginalised minority identity within four nation-states into a visible transnational presence. This broader field provides the backdrop for the next section, which examines the UK—a setting that "has provided a constructive environment for Kurds in diaspora in establishing and developing their cultural and social identity" (Abobeker 2016: 17).

2.2.1. Kurds in the UK

The Kurdish diaspora in the UK is part of broader Kurdish migration to Europe, which accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s due to political repression and armed conflict across the Middle East (Baser 2011; Akkaya 2011). Estimates vary, but between 130,000 and 300,000 Kurds are believed to live in the UK, with 60,000–80,000 in London alone (Begikhani et al. 2010: 30). While London

hosts the largest concentration of Kurds, notable communities exist in Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, Cardiff, Derby, Leeds, Plymouth, and Exeter.

As discussed in Section 2.2, community organisations have been central to sustaining Kurdish life in exile and raising public awareness (Griffiths 2002). The Kurdish Community Centre (KCC) in London, established in the 1980s, is the longest-standing such institution, while numerous other associations—often shaped by political developments in different parts of Kurdistan—reflect the diversity of perspectives within the diaspora (Khayati 2006: 10). Among them, the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) founded in London in 1992, has been particularly influential in drawing international attention to human rights abuses in Kurdish regions (D'Angelo 2008).

London has also served as a key centre for Kurdish media and cultural production. The launch of MED TV in 1995 by British Kurds marked the most ambitious diasporic media initiative of its time, advancing both Kurdish identity consciousness and efforts at language standardisation (Hassanpour 1995; Ayata 2011). That same year, the Western Kurdistan Association was established in London, offering educational courses—including a Supplementary School for Kurdish children—to teach Kurmancî (Salih & Issa 2013). Cultural centres such as the KCC have similarly acted as focal points for community life (D'Angelo 2008), reinforcing London's role as an "a battlespace diaspora" in which struggles over Kurdish identity are pursued beyond the homeland (Demir 2012).

The UK's relatively permissive civic environment has allowed for public expressions of Kurdishness that would have been restricted in the homeland. A striking example is the 2022 swearing-in of Sarbaz Barznji, a Kurdish-origin councillor and Deputy Mayor of Lambeth, who wore traditional Kurdish dress and spoke a Kurdish dialect (Rudaw 2022)—acts that, in Turkey for example, would have risked legal sanction (Yanik 2006).

Such freedoms illustrate how exile enables the rearticulation of identity (Geerse 2011: 383). Migration has allowed Kurds to reject imposed national identities in favour of Kurdishness, often expressed more coherently and deliberately than in the homeland (Hassanpour 1995; Ahmadzadeh 2003; Khayati 2008; Griffiths 2002; Eliassi 2015). Transnational migrants maintain identities and networks that cross borders, sustaining connections to both their countries of origin and their societies of settlement (Thomas 1997: 95; Swigart 2001: 3). Such transnational engagement can reinforce ethnicity and slow assimilation (Akkaya 2011: 5; Vickerman 2001: 220; Safran 1991).

Diaspora life also supports multiple, layered identities: Kurdishness can coexist with civic attachments to Britain (Wahlbeck 1998; Alinia 2004; Burke & Stete 2009: 4; Schmidinger 2011:23), particularly in a multicultural city like London. This dual orientation—rooted in transnational ties yet embedded in British urban life—forms the backdrop for this study's focus on second-generation

Kurds in London. It is within this diasporic space that questions of language, identity, and belonging are negotiated, contested, and reimagined.

3. Theoretical framework

Section 3 builds on the historical and sociopolitical context outlined in previous sections to introduce the key conceptual tools underpinning the present study. While Kurdishness—long denied through state repression and systemic erasure—is now more widely acknowledged, at least in symbolic terms, it is often framed in essentialist ways, as what Ergin (2014) describes as an "immutable category" (see also Sengul 2016; Çelik 2005; Saracoglu 2009). Such framings risk oversimplifying the lived complexity of Kurdish identity, which has always been shaped—and reshaped—through interactions with dominant cultural norms, both in the homeland and in diaspora (Abobeker 2016: 16).

To address this complexity, the theoretical framework is organised around two main areas of inquiry. Section 3.1 examines theories of dual identity and biculturalism, focusing on how second-generation individuals negotiate belonging across cultural contexts. This perspective is especially relevant given that "one cannot study a language without considering the society in which the language is used" (Sherwani & Barlik 2020: 750). Recent work on bilingualism highlights the need to account for "the sociolinguistic ecologies of bilingual communities" (Masullo, Casado & Leivada 2024: 20; Leivada et al. 2023; Rodrıguez-Ordoñez, Kasstan & O'Rourke 2022). Paying attention to the social, cultural, and personal factors shaping each bilingual experience is essential for understanding how language use intersects with broader questions of identity and belonging (Blanco-Elorrieta & Caramazza 2021). Building on this, Section 3.2 turns to the role of bilingualism in the lives of second-generation Kurds in London, exploring how two languages coexist in daily practices and how speakers' attitudes toward each language may evolve over time.

3.1. Negotiating dual identity and biculturalism

In contemporary sociology, identity is understood as multiple, fluid, and socially constructed (Barker 2012; Jenkins 1996; Buckingham 2008; Hall 1996). Rather than being fixed or stable, it is an ongoing, dynamic process—"never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. [It is] subject to a radical historicization, and [is] constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall 1996: 4). It is shaped both by self-identification and by external ascription (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1996), a process that Brubaker and

Cooper (2000: 14) describe as active and processual, involving "agents that do the identifying." Identity is therefore always negotiated in performative, transitional, and context-dependent ways (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; Pennycook 2010), and serves as a key lens through which social structures and relationships can be understood (Griffiths 2002; Jenkins 1996).

In migration contexts, second- and third-generation individuals often confront deeper questions of identity than their first-generation parents, growing up between cultural settings that differ from their ancestral origins (Abobeker 2016). They may be described as living between "two motherlands" (Jodeyr 2003), resulting in feelings of marginality or a "multifaced sense of belonging" (Eliassi 2013: 52). Although physically rooted in one society, they may retain a strong emotional attachment to another, shaped by the inherited diasporic consciousness of their parents (Cho 2007: 13). This positioning can give rise to dual or hybrid identities (Hall 1992): "a sense of belonging to more than one history, place, and future" (Docker 2001: vii; see also Cohen 1997: 26; Ionescu 2006: 13). Identity in this sense is not simply passed down; it is actively reconstructed through ongoing engagement with both heritage and dominant cultures (Hall 1992: 21; Butler 2001: 191).

The family is often the first site where this negotiation begins. First-generation parents shape early socialisation, embedding cultural practices and, in many cases, heritage language use (Sengul 2016: 167). For second-generation Kurds, the home can act as both a linguistic and cultural anchor while also serving as a point of departure into broader social environments. Beyond the family, community spaces—such as cultural centres, associations, and activist networks—offer arenas for collective expression and reinforcement of ethnic identity (Geerse 2011). However, identity is not merely inherited; second-generation immigrants are also embedded in national and local contexts where daily interactions with non-Kurdish peers and institutions require engagement with the dominant culture (Alinia 2016: 5; Mavroudi 2005: 3). This dual positioning requires constant negotiation between inherited frameworks and the lived realities of the host society.

London's multicultural landscape provides an especially relevant backdrop for such negotiations (Benedictus & Godwin 2005). Defined by UNESCO (2001) as the coexistence of diverse cultural expressions within a society, cultural diversity in cities like London is often framed as promoting tolerance while allowing minority groups "to maintain heritage practices" (Gallis et al. 2005: 12). Legal protections such as the Equality Act 2010 safeguard cultural expression (legislation.gov.uk), yet migrants and their descendants are still expected to integrate into the British society by learning English and aligning with national values (McGhee 2006). This creates a space in which second-generation individuals navigate between heritage and host cultures, adopting

elements of both to varying degrees (Marr 2000: 162; Berry 2006). Depending on personal circumstances and social context, this process—often described as acculturation—can lead to integration, assimilation, or separation (Berry 1997), each with different implications for identity, behaviour, and values (Abobeker 2016; Barkan 1995).

In diverse urban environments, integration can allow individuals to participate fully in the host society while maintaining strong ethnic identification (Berry 2006; Schmidinger 2011:23). In some cases, this setting even intensifies connections to heritage identity, leading younger generations to engage more deeply with their cultural origins than their parents (McDowall 2004: 456; Abobeker 2016: 272; Geerse 2011: 389). For some—especially those with a strong attachment to their heritage or a scepticism toward dominant cultural norms—this process may lead to separation, in which identification with the host society remains limited while ethnic identity is reinforced (Berry 1997). Conversely, the same environment can also foster assimilation, particularly when social pressures, discrimination (Wimmer 2013: 75; see also Correll et al. 2010; Harley, Rollins & Middleton 1999; Thornicroft et al. 2007), or exclusion make aligning with the dominant group seem advantageous (Malesevic 2006: 13). Assimilation has been described as a multidimensional process of boundary reduction, whereby ethnic distinctions and the associated social and cultural differences are gradually blurred or dissolved (Alba & Nee 2009; see also Barkan 1995: 49; Park & Burgess 1921: 735), including language, values, social networks, and institutional participation (Gordon 1964; Alba & Nee 2003: 11). Education is especially influential here, as children often begin adapting to majority norms in school (Abobeker 2016: 116), where national culture is presented in standardised forms that may marginalise minority identities (Gellner 1964: 163).

In London, identity negotiations are further complicated by the distinction often made between Britishness and Englishness. Research suggests that some ethnic minority individuals avoid identifying as English, perceiving it as racially coded as white (Leddy-Owen 2014), while others see it in more inclusive terms (Condor, Gibson & Abell 2006). Among younger generations, there is evidence of a gradual shift toward decoupling Englishness from whiteness (Leddy-Owen 2014: 1450). This study incorporates these nuances into its analysis of how participants position their identities.

For second-generation Kurds in London, identity emerges through the interplay of inherited cultural frameworks and the everyday realities of life in a multicultural city. While such contexts can create opportunities for dual identification, they also present tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation, negotiated within families, community spaces, and public

institutions. Within this negotiation, language plays a particularly significant role. As outlined in Section 2, Kurmancî is not only a means of communication but also a historically marginalised and symbolically charged marker of Kurdish identity. Suppressed in the homeland yet revalued in exile, it carries meanings of both resistance and belonging. The next section therefore examines the role of bilingualism in shaping second-generation identity, exploring how Kurmancî and English coexist, compete, and intertwine in daily life.

3.2. Bilingualism and identity in diasporic contexts

Language is widely recognised not simply as a communicative tool, but as a key expression of identity, culture, and emotion (Echitchi 2019). Beyond facilitating interaction, it embodies collective memory, social belonging, and deeply felt attachments (Sherwani & Barlik 2020: 750). As such, language often serves as a powerful marker of both individual and group identity, shaping how cultural affiliations are experienced, maintained, and transmitted (Gumperz 1971; Wardhaugh 1986; Fishman 1991; Edwards 2009; Joseph 2004). As Fishman (1991: 276) notes, "the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest."

This connection is particularly pronounced for minority languages (Edwards 2010; Serpell 1993: 97; Makoni & Trudell 2006). Such languages carry rich cultural, historical, and anthropological knowledge, acting as anchors of identity in multiethnic societies (Majidi 2013: 33). Efforts to preserve them are therefore more than linguistic endeavours—they are central to cultural sustainability and intergenerational continuity. Yet, due to their subordinate position in relation to majority languages, minority languages remain disproportionately vulnerable to marginalisation, attrition, and eventual extinction (Edwards 2010).

Kurmancî, a minority language with no official status, occupies a particularly significant symbolic and cultural position in the Kurdish diaspora. It operates as a carrier of collective memory, resistance, and identity (Kymlicka & Patten 2003; Kymlicka 2001: 78; Phillipson et al. 1995; Kreyenbroeck 1992; McDowall 2004; Preece 2005: 100; Vali 2003). For many Kurdish parents, passing the language on to their children is seen as a cultural responsibility (Salih 2009: 47). However, for second-generation individuals in the UK, this transmission occurs in an environment where English dominates public life, education, and peer interaction—creating both structural and social barriers to sustained use.

In diasporic contexts, second-generation speakers are typically raised in bilingual environments where two languages—often of unequal status—come into contact. In this study, bilingualism is understood as the regular use of two languages, regardless of fluency or balance of

use (Grosjean & Li 2013). This lens offers valuable insight into how linguistic and cultural identities are negotiated in host societies. Navigating both a heritage language and the dominant societal language, bilingual speakers often develop complex, layered forms of belonging shaped by this linguistic duality (Li Wei: 2018). While a heritage language may be retained, it is also prone to erosion over time (Tandefelt 1994). Language maintenance or shift depends on intersecting factors such as generational transmission, group size, perceived status, and broader socioeconomic conditions (Gal 1979; Kamwangamalu 2007: 227). Although first-generation Kurdish migrants often make deliberate efforts to preserve Kurmancî (see Section 2), the attitudes of the second generation remain pivotal to its future (Holmes & Harlow 1991; Baker 1992; Holmes 2008).

The first generation often adopts more conservative attitudes towards heritage language retention, while the second is more deeply embedded in the bilingual and bicultural realities of the host society (Tosi 1984). In the UK, English typically becomes the language of education, work, and wider social participation (Kawamura & Goza 2013; Sengul 2016: 167). Entry into the school system frequently marks the shift towards English dominance (Appel & Muysken 2005), a trend reinforced by structural factors such as national education policies, urbanisation, and perceptions of English as a pathway to mobility and success (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter 1977; Soylemez 2004: 110). Language ideologies—socially embedded beliefs about the value of particular languages—play a central role in this process (Milroy & Milroy 1985; Irvine 1998: 255). Dominant languages are often associated with prestige and opportunity (Giles et al. 1979), while minority languages may be stigmatised as socially inferior (Edwards 2010: 21). For second-generation Kurds, this can produce conflicting pressures: the symbolic value of Kurmancî versus the functional dominance of English.

English holds a dual role in this context: it is both the national language of the UK and a global lingua franca (Echitchi 2019). It dominates international domains such as business, science, media, and technology (Crystal 1997) and is widely associated with modernity, mobility, and prestige (Irvine & Gal 2000: 255; Peucker 2008). This global status can erode minority language transmission, particularly when those languages lack prestige or standardisation (Appel & Muysken 2005; Arslan 2015: 86; Peucker 2008: 217; Abdullah & Hemed 2020: 167; Crystal 1997). In such contexts, speakers may develop a sense of linguistic inferiority, leading to what Crystal (2010: 86) terms “language suicide”—the conscious or unconscious decision to abandon their language by choosing not to transmit it to future generations. In bilingual settings, this often results in “subtractive bilingualism” (Appel & Muysken 2005), where one language is gradually displaced by the other.

While the structural forces cited above contribute significantly to the vulnerability of minority languages like Kurmancî, it is often personal attitudes, values, and choices that play a decisive role in whether a language is maintained or lost (Majidi 2013: 26). Language functions in overlapping ways—as a practical means of communication and as a marker of identity (House 2003). In bilingual settings, speakers may exercise agency in choosing which language to use in a given domain. For many in the Kurdish diaspora, Kurmancî is valued not only for communication but as a language of identification, imbued with historical significance, symbolic power, and emotional depth. Its sociohistorical status as a language of resistance can help sustain it despite its low vitality (Appel & Muysken 2005; Jamallullail & Nordin 2019). This reflects what Appel and Muysken (2005) describe as language loyalty: the enduring connection between linguistic practice and ethnolinguistic identity.

In practice, this means that while English dominates institutional and public life, many Kurdish families continue to use Kurmancî in intimate, private sphere such as the home. This uneven bilingualism—driven by affective attachment to one language and functional reliance on the other—raises important questions about how, when, and where each language is used in daily life. The following section examines these dynamics across different uses, alongside the potential outcomes of language contact.

3.3. Language use and contact phenomena among bilinguals

In bilingual settings, speakers tend to associate particular languages with specific domains of life, shaped by factors such as setting, interlocutor, and communicative purpose—a pattern captured by Grosjean and Li's (2013) "complementarity principle." Language use is thus context-dependent, structured by the physical or socially recognised location, the social configuration of participants and their roles, and the purpose of the interaction (Gal 1979).

For minority languages such as Kurmancî, this often leads to unbalanced use (Grosjean & Li 2013): the heritage language is largely confined to private and familial contexts, while the dominant societal language—in this case English—prevails in public, educational, and institutional domains (Appel & Muysken 2005). However, the scope of a minority language can extend beyond the home under certain conditions. In London, the size and density of Kurdish communities in particular neighbourhoods supports intra-community communication in Kurmancî (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977). Organised political and cultural initiatives further reinforce its ethnolinguistic vitality through language planning measures such as community-run classes, cultural events, local print and broadcast media, and increasingly, online platforms (Gal 1979; Jamallullail & Nordin 2019).

Despite these supports, the risk of language shift remains significant. Such shifts involve the redistribution of linguistic functions across domains (Lieberson & McCabe 1982). For younger generations, this can mean that Kurmancî is reserved for limited, informal exchanges, while English dominates cognitively and academically demanding contexts. Yet these boundaries are rarely static. English often enters the home early—through schooling, peer contact, and sibling interaction—and may gradually replace Kurmancî even the linguistic ecology of the home (Tosi 1984; Appel & Muysken 2005).

Shifts in domain of language use has typically an impact on language proficiency. Grosjean and Li's (2013) "language grid" model captures this relationship: the more frequently a language is used across varied contexts, the more robustly it develops; conversely, infrequent or restricted use can lead to attrition (Hilpert 2018). Scholars distinguish between surface fluency—developed through context-rich, everyday exchanges—and conceptual-linguistic proficiency, which underpins literacy and academic skills (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa 1976; Cummins 1984). Language loss is not confined to vocabulary but may involve morphological simplification (Smolicz 1983), syntactic generalisation (Appel & Muysken 2005), or stylistic narrowing to a single register (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter 1977)—processes often associated with subtractive bilingualism (Valdès 2005), where the dominant language gradually displaces the minority one in both function and style.

Importantly, the bilingual speaker is themself "the locus of language contact" (Valdés 2005: 414). Language use varies according to context, topic, and proficiency, and over time contact can produce not only loss but also innovation, as linguistic features are transferred, replaced, or borrowed. In situations of sustained bilingualism, such as among Kurds in London, processes of borrowing, interference, and code-switching are common (Matras 2011: 207).

These interactions are shaped by what Grosjean and Li (2013) term "language mode"—a dynamic cognitive state in which both languages are active to varying degrees, even in apparently monolingual contexts. Bilinguals draw on two internalised linguistic systems, moving between them in response to social, cultural, and conversational cues (Grosjean 2014). While one language typically serves as the base or unmarked code in a given situation, the other remains semi-active, enabling cross-linguistic influence. These systems are distinct yet interconnected, a relationship captured by the interdependent development hypothesis (Paradis, Genesee & Crago 2021). The ways in which bilinguals draw on these interconnected systems are highly variable, shaped by situational demands and the identities speakers seek to convey. Contact phenomena—whether unconscious transfer, strategic switching, or long-term borrowing— function not only as linguistic

adaptations but also as markers of sociocultural negotiation and identity positioning (Masullo, Casado & Leivada 2024; Wiese, Sauermann & Bracke 2022).

Transfer—also referred to as interference (Weinreich 1953)—is one possible outcome of bilingual language activation, i.e. language mode (Grosjean 2014; Grosjean & Li 2013). When both linguistic systems are cognitively active, elements from one language may influence the other across multiple levels, including phonology, lexicon, syntax, and pragmatics (Hilpert 2018). Transfer can be static, taking the form of fossilised pronunciation patterns or persistent grammatical structures shaped by the dominant language (Burling 1959; Grosjean & Li 2013). It can also be dynamic, occurring spontaneously in interaction—e.g., a one-off lexical substitution, a momentary mispronunciation, or the temporary application of a syntactic structure from one language while speaking the other (Grosjean & Li 2013).

Closely related is code-switching, which involves alternating between two languages either within or between sentences. While switching at the word level can resemble lexical transfer, code-switching is generally a more systematic phenomenon, frequently observed among fluent bilinguals and particularly in informal or emotionally charged contexts (Crystal 1992; Thomason & Kaufman 1988). Gumperz (1971: 59) defines it as the "juxtaposition of elements from two (or more) languages," with each element retaining the semantic and grammatical features of its source language (see also Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 96; Dako 2002: 50; Lipski 2005: 1; Myers-Scotton 2006: 234).

Code-switching can take several forms: tag-switching (inserting discourse markers or interjections from one language into another), intra-sentential switching (within a sentence), and inter-sentential switching (between clauses or sentences) (Poplack 1980; Gumperz 1971). Such switches tend to occur at structurally compatible points—those where the syntax of both languages aligns—consistent with the "linearity constraint" (Poplack 1980; Woolford 1983). Other syntactic models emphasise "dependency constraints," whereby lexically or grammatically bound elements (e.g., a verb and its object) are unlikely to come from different languages (Di Sciullo et al. 1975).

Code-switching may also be shaped by triggers. Clyne (1972) distinguishes internal triggers —particular lexical items that prompt a shift in language before or after their occurrence—from external triggers such as changes in setting, topic, or interlocutor. Functionally, switching can serve referential purposes (Appel & Muysken 2005), for example when a concept is more precisely expressed in one language or when culturally specific vocabulary lacks a direct equivalent. It can also perform interactional functions, such as including or excluding interlocutors depending on shared linguistic competence. Beyond these, code-switching can index identity, allowing speakers

to position themselves as bilingual or bicultural in a particular interaction (Poplack 1980). It may signal a stance, shift in tone, or topic, and can serve as a stylistic resource for creativity, emphasis, humour, or irony (Gumperz & Hernández-Chavez 1975). Like transfer, code-switching reflects the bilingual speaker's ability to navigate between two linguistic systems in response to context, interlocutor, and communicative intent, foregrounding questions of identity, agency, and belonging.

Contact between languages can also result in borrowing—the incorporation of linguistic material from one language into another (Haugen 1950: 212; Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 37; Marjie-Okyere 2013; Myers-Scotton 2006: 211; Curnow 2001: 413; Azeez & Awla 2015: 12). Borrowing is a universal phenomenon (Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009: 55), encompassing the adoption and subsequent integration of forms from a donor language into the recipient language system (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 37; Crystal 1985: 36; Hudson 2000). Although in principle any linguistic feature can be borrowed (Crystal 2010: 48; Curnow 2001: 417), borrowing tends to follow certain patterns (Haugen 1950; Thomason & Kaufman 1988): lexical items—especially non-core or culturally specific vocabulary—are borrowed first, while function words and structural borrowing involving phonology, morphology, or syntax typically occur only under conditions of sustained, intense contact (Thomason 2001: 10; Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 75; Haspelmath 2008: 49; Muysken 1981; Appel & Muysken 2005).

Two main motivations drive borrowing: need and prestige (Durkin 2014). Need-based borrowing arises when a new concept or object lacks an existing term in the recipient language, leading to the adoption of a foreign word to "fill conceptual gaps" (Petryshyn 2014: 6), as posited by the deficit hypothesis (Kachru 1994: 147; Ghafar & Mohamedamin 2023: 9). Prestige-based borrowing reflects sociolinguistic dynamics, with terms adopted for their perceived modernity, authority, or social value, typically flowing "from the more prestigious language to the less prestigious one" (Myers-Scotton 2006: 211; Newman 2002).

In the case of English and Kurmancî, borrowing is shaped by both global and local histories of contact. English, as a global language, is a major source of lexical borrowing for minority and regional languages, particularly in domains such as technology, media, and science (Sedeeq 2017: 182). Kurmancî has also long been influenced by dominant regional languages—Arabic, Turkish, and Persian—making it structurally predisposed to incorporate foreign elements (Hasanpoor 1999: 25). It is not uncommon to encounter English-origin words in Kurmancî, particularly for concepts linked to modernity or technological innovation—domains in which no prior equivalent existed (Ghafar & Mohamedamin 2023: 9; Sabir 2013).

Borrowed constructions often undergo nativisation, becoming phonologically, morphologically, or semantically adapted to fit the recipient language's system (Poplack, Sankoff & Miller 1988: 93; Hudson 2000: 247; Aitchison 2001: 142). In the Kurdish context, this process—sometimes described as "Kurdification"—ensures that borrowings are integrated into Kurmancî's grammatical and phonological framework (Hasanpoor 1999: 153; Al-Omoush & Al Faqara 2010: 29; Tatsioka 2008: 135). Importantly, such borrowings may occur even when the donor language is not widely spoken in the community (Myers-Scotton 2006: 216–217). The present study does not aim to catalogue English-origin loanwords in Kurmancî; rather, it examines how second-generation bilingual speakers incorporate such items into their everyday speech and how these practices relate to identity positioning.

Attitudes toward borrowing and other forms of cross-linguistic influence are often as much ideological as they are linguistic. In some communities, the perceived "purity" of a language is tied to questions of authenticity and cultural continuity, fostering linguistic purism—the belief that foreign influence threatens the survival of a language (Casegrande 1954; Hasanpoor 1999: 21). Such views are particularly common in contexts where the language has been historically marginalised, making it a symbol of resistance and heritage preservation.

Ultimately, cross-linguistic influence must be understood within a broader sociocultural frame. Bilingual speakers draw on both their linguistic repertoires and their cultural affiliations, positioning themselves in ways that reflect—and sometimes challenge—the social meanings attached to each language (Lippi Green 1994: 165). It is within this dynamic intersection of communicative practice and cultural symbolism that the present study is situated. The following section outlines the methodological framework for examining how second-generation Kurmancî-speaking Kurds in London negotiate identity and belonging, and how these negotiations are reflected in their everyday language use.

4. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework adopted to explore how second-generation Kurds in London negotiate identity and language, with particular attention to the role of Kurmancî in diasporic contexts. The research design was shaped by the need to capture participants' lived experiences and language practices within their social and cultural environments. The subsections that follow set out the rationale for the chosen approach (Section 4.1), procedures for participant recruitment (Section 4.2), methods of data collection and analysis (Section 4.3), and the principal limitations of the study (Section 4.4).

4.1. Research design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in sociolinguistic fieldwork to examine how second-generation Kurds in London experience, negotiate, and articulate Kurdishness and Britishness. A qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture the lived, nuanced, and socially embedded dimensions of identity and language—elements often inaccessible through quantitative methods (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2010; Lamont & Swidler 2014; Mason 2006). Rather than pursuing statistical generalisability, the aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of "how individuals interpret, understand and define the world around them" (Faraday & Plummer 1979: 776), and how these interpretations may be articulated through language.

Given the predominantly spoken and often informal nature of Kurmancî (cf. Section 2), written instruments such as questionnaires were deemed unsuitable. Instead, semi-structured interviews were chosen to elicit personal narratives and to explore the emotional and cultural significance of language in participants' lives. This approach enabled the inclusion of the "subjective voice" essential in studies of identity and cultural positioning (Faraday & Plummer 1979: 776), allowing participants to articulate their views "in their own words" (Byrne 2012: 209; Bryman 2008). Focus groups were initially considered but ultimately rejected, as group dynamics risk inhibiting openness and shaping responses to align with perceived group norms (Rabiee 2004).

Interviews also offered insight into the broader social processes influencing participants' linguistic and cultural trajectories (Deborah 2003). As Mason (2006: 16) notes, "[t]he particular strengths of qualitative research lie in the knowledge it provides of the dynamics of social processes, change and social context," and in its ability to answer complex "how" and "why" questions. Several interviews evolved into life-history narratives, tracing participants' relationships to Kurdishness and Britishness over time—from early language socialisation to present-day reflections shaped by schooling, peer networks, and everyday life (Bryman 2008; Faraday & Plummer 1979). These accounts highlight identity as dynamic, continually reshaped through linguistic, familial, and social encounters.

The following section outlines participant recruitment procedures and provides background information on those who took part in the study.

4.2. Participant recruitment and sampling

This study draws on interviews with twelve second-generation Kurds, aged between 20 and 30, all of whom were born and raised in London to families originating from Bakûr (Northern Kurdistan, Turkey). The group comprises eight men and four women, engaged in diverse educational and professional fields at the time of interview, including students, teachers, artists, and professionals such as a psychologist, banker, and truck driver. All participants were Kurmancî–English bilinguals, as the focus is on examining the interaction between these two languages; individuals with additional language repertoires—such as Turkish or Arabic—were excluded. An overview of participant demographics is provided in Table 1.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Profession
1	Zîlan	20	Female	Student
2	Sîpan	24	Male	PhD Student
3	Eren	23	Male	Teacher
4	Aryan	22	Male	Truck driver
5	Ravin	23	Male	Student
6	Araz	22	Male	Event organiser
7	Berfîn	27	Female	Teacher
8	Aron	21	Male	Student
9	Rêzan	30	Male	Banker
10	Agît	25	Male	Artist
11	Larya	26	Female	Psychologist
12	Zara	24	Female	Artist

Table 1: Overview of participants

Participants were recruited through a combination of community outreach and digital engagement. Initial contact was established via Kurdish community organisations in London, which circulated a call for participants through their networks. This process was complemented by targeted posts on social media, enabling outreach to a broader audience beyond institutional contacts. Notably, no personal acquaintances were involved in the recruitment process, helping to preserve neutrality and minimise potential bias.

Eligibility criteria required participants to: (1) be second-generation Kurdish (i.e. born in the UK to Kurdish parents), (2) have been raised in London, and (3) possess at least some competence in both Kurmancî and English. Full fluency in Kurmancî was not required, as the study sought to examine whether and how differing levels of proficiency and variation among bilingual speakers might relate to self-identification and expressions of Kurdishness.

Ethical considerations held paramount significance, especially given the historical marginalisation of Kurdish communities and the personal nature of discussions surrounding language and identity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made aware that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. To ensure privacy, all names were anonymised using pseudonyms. The researcher was transparent about the purpose and scope of the study and committed to maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note, ethical research practice goes beyond formal protocols; it requires a sustained attentiveness to participants' safety, dignity, and well-being. No piece of data was considered more important than the individuals who provided it. As Karataş (2022: 22) highlights, the quality of research data is deeply shaped by the level of trust and openness established between researcher and participant. This ethical framework shaped not only participant recruitment but also the process of data collection and interpretation.

The next section outlines the procedures for conducting and analysing the interviews, with particular attention to the methodological tools used to examine participants' language use and identity.

4.3. Data collection and analytical approach

Data were collected through one-hour, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted primarily in Kurmancî. This format provided a balance between consistency and flexibility: an pre-prepared interview guide ensured thematic comparability across participants, while the open-ended nature of the questions allowed individuals to narrate their experiences in their own terms (Bryman 2008). Core topics were addressed in all interviews—such as how participants define and present their identity, navigate cultural belonging, and perceive and use Kurmancî in relation to English—yet the structure of each conversation remained intentionally adaptable. Many interviews evolved into "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess 1984: 102), enabling deeper engagement with participants' reflections on identity and language. While the same guide was used throughout, the direction of each interview often shifted according to what participants chose to prioritise, reflecting the trust established during the interaction (Burgess 1984: 103). Open-ended questions gave participants

control over the depth and detail of their responses. They were encouraged to reflect on their own trajectories—from early language socialisation to present-day experiences—offering insight into how identity is articulated, shaped, and renegotiated over time.

Each interview began with informal conversation to create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, an important step in fostering openness around potentially sensitive topics. Following Rubin and Rubin's (2011) emphasis on rapport-building in qualitative research, a conversational and flexible style was adopted to support trust and encourage rich, participant-led responses. As Bryman (2008) notes, researchers inevitably bring aspects of their own positionality to the process; complete detachment is neither fully possible nor always desirable. In this study, a shared Kurdish background between researcher and participants may have fostered familiarity and mutual understanding, helping to facilitate open dialogue.

The interviews were conducted primarily in Kurmancî, with participants informed in advance that they could use English if preferred. One participant, Rêzan, chose to conduct the interview mainly in English. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and translated by the researcher, as no reliable transcription software exists for Kurmancî. One exception was Rêzan's interview, which was not recorded at his request; detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after the session. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, all transcriptions were produced verbatim. For the non-recorded interview, every effort was made to remain faithful to the participant's phrasing and intent.

The collected data were analysed through a combination of thematic and discourse-based approaches to explore how participants articulated identity, belonging, and language use. Thematic analysis provided a flexible yet systematic method for examining meanings, perceptions, and emotional expressions within the interviews (Braun & Clarke 2006). Its adaptability made it particularly suited to the complexity of bilingual identity, allowing for "rich and detailed, yet complex, accounts of data" (Braun & Clarke 2006: 6). An inductive approach was adopted, with themes emerging directly from the data through repeated close readings and detailed coding. Codes focused on recurring narrative patterns, especially those relating to linguistic experience and self-identification, which were gradually refined into sub-themes and then synthesised into broader categories (Creswell 2002).

In parallel, elements of discourse analysis were employed to attend not only to what participants said, but how they said it—considering discursive choices, hesitations, shifts in tone, and narrative structure. This drew on the concept of situated language use, which foregrounds a "bottom-up approach in which local action and interaction [is] embedded in a wider social world"

(Creese 2008: 233; Copland & Creese 2015). The combination of thematic and discourse-based approaches enabled the analysis to capture both the content of participants' accounts and the communicative strategies through which those accounts were constructed.

To preserve the integrity of participants' voices, the analysis prioritised low-inference description, keeping interpretations closely aligned with the language and expressions used by speakers. Analytic codes were developed to guide interpretation and were revisited throughout the writing process. The raw data was consulted regularly to minimise interpretive bias and ensure that the final themes remained firmly grounded in participants' lived realities.

4.4. Potential limitations and further research

While this study provides insights into the intersection of language and identity among second-generation Kurds in London, several methodological and interpretive limitations should be acknowledged.

A key limitation concerns the scope of the study, both in terms of method and time frame. The exclusive reliance on interviews means that while participants' explicit reflections on language, identity, and belonging were captured, the research may not fully represent how Kurdishness is enacted in less self-conscious, everyday contexts. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 556) observe, "most of everyday life is devoid of national inflection," and a more ethnographic, "wait-and-listen" approach might have revealed subtler, implicit forms of identification. Combining interviews with participant observation could therefore be a productive avenue for future work. In addition, the study offers only a temporal snapshot, capturing identity and language practices at a single moment. These practices are likely to shift across the life course or in response to political and social change, suggesting that longitudinal research could provide deeper insight into how such dynamics evolve over time.

A second limitation concerns selection bias. The sample included only participants who reported at least some use of Kurmancî, thereby excluding those who identify as Kurdish but have no active connection to the language. While this was a deliberate choice to examine patterns of bilingual language use, it inevitably narrowed the range of perspectives, potentially excluding more assimilated or differently-situated Kurdish voices.

Linguistic factors also presented challenges. Conducting interviews primarily in Kurmancî may have influenced the narratives participants chose to share—or omit—particularly if certain concepts or experiences were more readily expressed in English. One interview (with Rêzan) was conducted mainly in English, highlighting the potential for language choice to shape the form and

content of responses. Moreover, the process of translating and transcribing Kurmancî into English carries the risk of subtle meaning loss, especially for culturally specific or affectively loaded expressions.

Researcher positionality is another consideration. Sharing a Kurdish background with participants likely supported rapport and openness, but may also have shaped the interaction. Participants might have emphasised aspects of Kurdishness that aligned with perceived researcher expectations, a form of the 'interviewer effect' described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

The relatively small sample size—twelve participants, all based in London—also limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to the wider Kurdish diaspora. The intention, however, was not statistical representativeness, but an in-depth exploration of how Kurdishness is lived, felt, and articulated within a specific diasporic and sociolinguistic setting.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a detailed account of the ways in which second-generation Kurdish bilinguals navigate identity and language in everyday life in London. These findings may serve as a foundation for future comparative work—across regions, language backgrounds, or generations—and for studies incorporating participant observation or other ethnographic methods.

The following section presents the main findings of the study, drawing on participants' narratives to examine how Kurdishness and Britishness are negotiated in personal and collective terms.

5. Findings and discussion

For many second-generation Kurds, identity is not inherited in a fixed or unified form but emerges through lived experience—a continual process of "becoming" (Hall 1992). While historically grounded, identity is never fully determined by origin (Hall 1990); instead, it is constructed and re-constructed in what Bhabha (1994) terms the "third space," where hybrid and diasporic forms generate new cultural meanings. Ethnicity, therefore, is not a constant or universally salient category but one whose relevance fluctuates across individuals and situations (Abobeker 2016: 235). National identity, likewise, is a personal and situational construction, shaped by the repertoire of positions available within specific social contexts.

Within this framework, participants' self-understandings are situated at the intersection of inherited attachments to Kurdishness and lived experiences of Britishness. Rather than fixed labels, these attachments are relational, negotiated, and context-dependent, shaped by family histories, intergenerational memory, community involvement, linguistic practice, and everyday interactions in

London's multicultural environment—an environment offering spaces for inclusion while also circulating public narratives that define and sometimes constrain ethnic belonging (Gallis et al. 2005; McGhee 2006).

The sections that follow examine how participants navigate these intersecting identities across multiple domains. Section 5.1 explores self-positioning between Kurdishness and Britishness, attending to expressions of affinity, ambivalence, and strategic distancing. Section 5.2 examines the formation of Kurdish–British subjectivities through intergenerational transmission and participation in community and peer networks. Section 5.3 turns to language as a central site of identity work, analysing attitudes toward Kurmancî and English, patterns of use, and perceptions of language loss, hybridity, and linguistic purism.

5.1. Between roots and place: From Kurdish to British to in-between

While all participants in this study share a Kurdish background and were raised in London, their sense of identity does not conform to a single model. These positions range from an unequivocal prioritisation of Kurdishness to more blended or hybrid identifications, and in a few cases to a pragmatic leaning toward Britishness. Such diversity reflects forms of translocational positionality (Anthias 2008)—identity as a shifting alignment of heritage, locality, and structural opportunity, rather than a single stable category. Participants express differing levels of attachment to Kurdishness and Britishness, ranging from strong affinity to marked distance or ambivalence.

For participants who foreground Kurdishness, Britishness is often articulated in institutional, legal, or geographic terms—as something one has or inhabits rather than something one feels. In (1), Zîlan lists Kurdishness first, followed by gender and personal name, omitting Britishness entirely:

> (1) **Zîlan**: My identity? I would say I am Kurdish. I am female, and my name is Zîlan. That is my identity, I would say.

Her ethnic identity seems to operate as her principal marker of self-definition. The sequence in which she names the aspects of her identity places Kurdishness in the primary position, with gender and personal name following, while national identity is absent altogether. When asked about Britishness, her definition remains detached:

(2) **Zîlan**: Um, I would say.. I would say being British is, uh… having a British citizenship, being here, that is what British is to me.

The framing in (2) positions Britishness as a matter of legal status and physical presence rather than cultural affinity or emotional belonging. Her reliance on tangible criteria such as citizenship and location, combined with the hesitancy in her phrasing, points to a functional and detached understanding of Britishness.

Berfîn likewise places ethnicity and gender at the centre of her self-definition, linking them directly to histories of marginalisation:

(3) **Berfîn**: For me, I am Kurdish, I am a woman. I think [my identity] has very much to do with my ethnicity and my gender, kind of things that unfortunately have gone through oppression. They kind of feel more important to me, to my identity.

In (3), identity is rooted in two interconnected categories—ethnicity and gender—both framed as enduring sites of historical and ongoing oppression. This emphasis indicates that belonging is shaped not only by cultural heritage but also by shared experiences of marginalisation, which heighten their importance in Berfîn's self-identification (Hall 1996). Kurdishness, in this sense, is not merely an ethnic label but a politicised identity forged through collective memory and experiences of structural inequality. It reflects what Brubaker (2009) terms groupness—a strong, affective attachment to an imagined collective. Britishness, by contrast, is positioned as external to the self:

(4) **Berfîn**: I have a British passport technically, but I do not feel that way. I do not feel like I can ever really say that I am British.

This separation between legal citizenship and emotional attachment reflects "the politics of belonging"—the distinction between formal membership in a nation and the deeper, socially negotiated sense of inclusion (Yuval-Davis 2011). Although she formally holds British citizenship, it holds no emotional or cultural resonance for her, to the extent that she feels unable to say, "I am British."

For some, Kurdishness is the immediate and unqualified answer to the question "Where are you from?" Zara, for instance, dismisses local affiliations in favour of heritage identity:

(5) **Zara**: If someone asks me where I am from, I just say I am Kurdish. I do not do the classic 'I am from London, I am part of London,' all of that. I would just say I am Kurdish.

Kurdishness forms the central response to questions of origin, creating distance from localised or national affiliations. Her later comment makes the boundary between residence and belonging explicit:

(6) **Zara**: I do not consider myself British, to be honest. Like, although I was born and grew up here, I consider myself like… I just live in England.

Zara's phrasing suggests not only the absence of emotional attachment to Britishness but also a refusal to equate residence with belonging. By positioning herself as someone who "just lives in England," she separates physical location from identity, treating Britishness as a category she does not claim despite being born and raised in the UK. This perspective resonates with diasporic narratives in which homeland identity remains primary and place of residence is acknowledged only in pragmatic terms (Thomas 1997; Mahmod 2019).

Aryan makes a similar distinction, presenting Kurdishness as an enduring identity, and Britishness as contingent:

(7) **Aryan**: My identity and ethnicity is Kurdish. You cannot really lose that, I do not think. My nationality right now is British.

His use of "right now" in (7) suggests that Britishness is understood as situational, tied to current civic status, while Kurdishness is imagined as a permanent and unlosable aspect of the self, i.e. "something that you cannot really lose." Britishness is again framed as a current civic status, acknowledged for administrative purposes rather than integrated into his sense of self. For Zîlan, Berfîn, Zara and Aryan, Kurdishness operates as a "thick" identity, embedded in history, affect, and collective meaning, whereas Britishness functions as a "thin" identity—instrumental, legal, or geographic in nature (Terlouw 2009).

Other participants placed Britishness at the core of their self-definition, presenting it as the unmarked or default identity. In these accounts, Britishness is tied to everyday life and social

belonging, while Kurdishness occupies a secondary, often heritage-based role—often linked to ancestry rather than lived experience. Ravîn's narrative captures this orientation:

> (8) **Ravîn**: My identity? If someone asks me, I would probably say I am British, to me that is a casual thing. […] I was born in London, I am a Londoner. If they really want to know where like my parents are from, my origins, I would say they are Kurdish. […] Me being Kurdish, I was just born into it really.

In (8), Britishness is presented as a taken-for-granted part of the self, described as "casual" and grounded in birthplace and everyday life. Kurdishness is mentioned in terms of lineage, i.e. "[my parenst] are Kurdish," rather than emotionally charged. This stands in contrast to participants such as Zîlan or Berfîn, for whom Kurdishness seems to be deeply ingrained and personal. For Ravîn, Kurdishness feels external and inherited, while Britishness is internalised and actively lived.

Like Ravîn, Aron places Britishness before Kurdishness in his self-identification, presenting it as a taken-for-granted aspect of his everyday identity:

> (9) **Aron**: I would call myself British. Then also Kurdish. It depends what they are asking. […] The British culture, it is a part of me anyway. I, like, I think it will be around forever. Well, I think it will be around for way longer than what I can say Kurdish culture is going to be around for. […] What is means to be Kurdish? I have not really thought about that.

Although he acknowledges both aspects of his identity, Aron frames Britishness as more enduring and culturally sustainable, whereas Kurdishness is seen as vulnerable to decline. His remark that British culture "is a part of [him] anyway" suggests that Britishness is an embedded part of him, unlike Kurdishness, which would demand conscious effort to sustain. This perspective stands in stark contrast to Aryan's, who described Kurdishness as something "[he] cannot really lose" and Britishness as tied to his current circumstances. Furthermore, Aron's admission that he has "not really thought about" what it means to be Kurdish points to a more passive sense of Kurdishness, one that is less actively conceptualised compared to the secure of Britishness in his self-understanding. These accounts highlight how participants assign different degrees of permanence and emotional weight to their identities—sometimes reversing each other's hierarchies entirely.

Rêzan's account bridges these positions, reflecting a shift over time from strong alignment with Britishness to a more deliberate reclamation of Kurdishness:

(10) **Rêzan**: I have effectively been brought up as a British person, a Westerner. I mean, I was born in a Kurdish household, but I never felt Kurdish growing up. And only very recently in the sort of the last few years, did I decide I wanted to sort of take some power back take some ownership of this problem […] I was not interested in my cultural roots. I just wanted to fit in this country, with these people.

His trajectory illustrates how identity is not fixed but re-negotiated, moving from disconnection from heritage to active re-engagement (Hall 1996). Initially prioritising assimilation into the British society, Rêzan later reframed his relationship to Kurdishness as an act of agency and cultural ownership.

Despite having once wanted to feel fully British, Rêzan has always maintained a clear distinction between British and English identity:

(11) **Rêzan**: I never wanted to call myself English. Because to me, the word English is very specifically the ethnicity. […] In the UK, you can be English or Scottish or Welsh or Northern Irish. My view is, if you describe yourself as any of those things you are saying that you are rooted in the heritage, a native, ethnically of those regions.

This ethnic framing of Englishness is consistent across the sample, including among British-oriented participants such as Ravîn and Aron. While "British" is accepted as a civic and national identity, "English" is regarded as an exclusionary ethnic label (Leddy-Owen 2014; Thomas & Sanderson 2011), incompatible with their Kurdish heritage. In this sense, even for those who place greater emphasis on Britishness in their self-identification, Kurdishness remains an implicit point of reference of ethnicity.

These British-oriented accounts can be interpreted through Berry's (2006) acculturation framework as reflecting an assimilation or integration orientation, where the norms and values of the host society are internalised. In such cases, Kurdishness remains present but is less emotionally or politically charged, functioning more as background inheritance—or, as in Rêzan's case, something rediscovered later in life.

A third set of narratives reflect a more balanced, dual identification (Simon & Klandermans 2001), which is common in diasporic settings where daily life is lived across multiple cultural frames (Hall 1990; Mavroudi 2005). Kurdishness and Britishness are seen as complementary rather

than competing, forming a "third space" (Bhabha 1994). Participants articulate a sense of self that incorporates elements of each—whether blended, parallel, or mutually reinforcing.

Eren's account captures this trajectory of negotiated hybridity:

(12) **Eren**: I did not know what I was for a very long time. […] Now, I introduce myself as being a British Kurd.

Eren's upbringing, which offered limited cultural grounding in his Kurdish heritage, left him for much of his life without a stable ethnic anchor. In his twenties, he began actively exploring his background, adopting "British Kurd" as a self-description to encapsulate this dual positioning. In his case, Kurdishness is not a replacement for a previously established Britishness but a layer added to it, producing a hybrid identity negotiated through both cultural continuity and rearticulation. His case demonstrates the performative and negotiated nature of identity in diasporic life (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004).

For Sîpan, Kurdish and British elements may coexist without tension:

(13) **Sîpan**: I identify myself as a British Kurd. I do not really make a distinction between them. For me, it is both of them. I feel like they are equal to me. I can enjoy an English breakfast while listening to Kurdish music.

His pairing of everyday British and Kurdish practices illustrates the "third space," where elements from different cultural repertoires coexist within a single lived reality (Bhabha 1994). This is a form of hybridity without conflict, in which both identities are seamlessly integrated into daily life. The example of enjoying an English breakfast while listening to Kurdish music is not merely symbolic but reflects a state of cultural ease, where practices from both heritage and host societies are valued and actively inhabited (cf. "vernacular cosmopolitanism," Werbner 2002).

Larya's account also reflect a type of balance:

(14) **Larya**: I think I present myself in a British way, because I have obviously grown up here. But I definitely also say that I am Kurdish.

In (14), Larya's account illustrates a dual identification in which environment and heritage both play defining roles. She describes presenting herself "in a British way" due to her upbringing in the

UK, suggesting that public behaviours, speech, and mannerisms are shaped by her socialisation within British society. At the same time, she "definitely" identifies as Kurdish, signalling that Kurdishness remains an integral and non-negotiable part of her self-definition. This interplay reflects internal–external dialectic of identification (Jenkins 1996), in which identity is formed through the dynamic between self-perception and external recognition. In Larya's case, Britishness is the dominant frame in public contexts, while Kurdishness is actively claimed as part of who she is, allowing both affiliations to coexist without one subsuming the other. Her account reflects a practical balance: she moves through British spaces in ways shaped by her socialisation, while continuing to feel Kurdish. In Berry's (2006) terms, Larya's position corresponds to integration, maintaining heritage culture while engaging fully with the host society.

For Araz, context determines which identity is foregrounded:

> (15) **Araz**: I mean, I am probably both. I mean, identity — your real identity — it is something very hard to define. […] It is a lifestyle. So if you are raised in an environment, then you are going to pick up the habits. But at home, I am obviously Kurdish.

Britishness in (15) is associated with the public sphere—habits, behaviours, and interactional norms shaped by external environments—while Kurdishness is rooted in the private domain of family life. This domain-specific negotiation reflects a form of situational identity, in which different aspects of the self are foregrounded depending on social setting. His emphasis on context parallels findings in research on identity shifts in diasporic communities, where cultural practices adapt fluidly to different domains (Grosjean & Li 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). In this sense, Araz's positioning illustrates a form of integration that is not static but negotiated continuously through interaction with both heritage and host cultural spaces (Berry 2006).

Agît presents perhaps the most explicitly positive articulation of dual belonging in the sample, describing his Kurdish and London identities as mutually reinforcing:

> (16) **Agît**: I would define myself as being a Kurdish man from London, like a young Kurdish man from London, who is Gen Z. I would say culturally, like cultural affinity I am Kurdish. […] But London itself adds a lot to my identity. I consider myself a Londoner. […] When it comes to my London identity and Kurdish identity, I think they both affirm one another. I will definitely say it is a symbiotic relationship and that balance. I think I have found a balance, and hopefully I can go into more and more both of them, right? I want to be

remembered as a person who was devoutly Kurdish, like, proud of that identity, as well as London as well.

While his cultural affinity is firmly Kurdish, he sees London as adding depth and texture to who he is, framing the relationship between the two as "symbiotic." London's multicultural and creative environment makes space for heritage expression rather than constraining it. Later in the interview, he gives the example of being able to wear culturally significant Kurdish clothing in public without attracting unwanted attention, noting that London's fashion-forward and diverse atmosphere enables such expressions to blend seamlessly into the city's cultural fabric. For Agît, this is not simply a matter of coexistence but of mutual affirmation: London offers a stage on which Kurdishness can be visibly celebrated, while Kurdishness, in turn, gives meaning and distinction to his London identity. This interplay reflects a form of translocational positionality in which identity is shaped through the intersection of multiple cultural reference points, allowing each to enhance rather than compete with the other (Anthias 2002).

The accounts in this section demonstrate that identification among second-generation Kurds in London is far from monolithic. The findings point to three broad orientations[2]: (1) those who place Kurdishness at the centre of their self-definition and frame Britishness in legal or pragmatic terms, reflecting tendencies toward separation (Berry 2006); (2) those who foreground Britishness as the default or unmarked identity while situating Kurdishness as ancestral or secondary, aligning more closely with assimilationist tendencies (Berry 2006); and (3) those who integrate both in varying ways—whether through late reclamation of heritage, inherited hybridity, context-contingent switching, or mutually affirming hybridity—reflecting integration within the acculturation framework (Berry 2006). Across these positions, Kurdishness and Britishness are negotiated as relational, context-dependent resources, with their relative salience shaped by personal histories, socialisation patterns, and the structural context of life in London.

The next section (5.2) shifts from describing these forms of identification to analysing the processes through which Kurdish–British subjectivities are produced, with attention to family socialisation, community networks, place-based belonging, and the structural conditions of diasporic life in London.

[2] Please note that these categories are employed as an analytical device to structure the discussion; however, this study recognises that identities are inherently individual and cannot be exhaustively captured within fixed typologies.

5.2. The making of Kurdish-British subjectivities

The varied identity orientations outlined in the previous section do not arise in isolation (Masullo, Casado & Leivada 2024: 20). Rather, they are constructed through the interplay of several related factors. This section examines how these intersecting influences might shape the ways second-generation Kurds in London come to identify as Kurdish, British, or both. Drawing on participants' narratives, it explores how intergenerational transmission, community participation, and everyday encounters in public and private spheres in a multicultural urban setting such as London contribute to the formation and negotiation of Kurdish–British subjectivities. These influences interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. They may reinforce each other, generate tensions, or prompt re-evaluation over time, producing identities that are both situated and dynamic. By foregrounding these shaping forces, the following subsections sheds light on the processes through which diasporic identities are constructed, sustained, and reinterpreted across time and context.

5.2.1. Politics of inheritance and intergenerational memory

For second-generation Kurds, identity is often rooted in the legacies carried into the diaspora through family life (Geerse 2011). The home is typically the first site where Kurdishness is encountered—whether through language, cultural practices, political discussions, or, in some cases, through silence and absence (Sengul 2016). In each case, these transmissions underscore the performative and socially constructed nature of identity, highlighting its relational quality (Barker 2012; Jenkins 1996).

This section examines how familial inheritances—whether explicit or implicit—inform the ways Kurdish identity is internalised, reinterpreted, and carried forward in the disapora. All participants grew up in Kurdish households headed by first-generation immigrant parents, many of whom arrived in the UK under conditions of displacement, political repression, or war (Demir 2012). Yet the forms of identity transmission within these homes—and the ways they were received—varied considerably.

For some, Kurdishness was inherited in a distanced or passive form, shaped by family background but not actively reinforced or emotionally internalised. In this case, identity was acknowledged rather than embraced, with familial influence remembered as formative but not sustained. For others, Kurdishness was embedded in everyday, emotionally resonant practices—speaking Kurdish with elders, listening to traditional music, celebrating cultural events, or hearing stories about "where they come from" (cf. "narratives of origin," Anthias 2002). Such transmissions were often recalled as intimate and reassuring, anchoring identity without the need for overt

political framing. In other cases still, it was conveyed through explicitly political narratives or mediated by the silences and guardedness left by experiences of trauma (Hirsch 2007).

Some participants describe a relationship to Kurdish identity that is more inherited than actively cultivated, which is present in family background yet not deeply felt or sustained. For Ravîn, it exists largely as a fact of heritage, something known and repeated but not emotionally internalised:

> (17) **Ravîn**: Kurdishness is my family background really, that is just what I have been told—to say I am Kurdish, because of my parents.

In (17), Kurdishness appears less as a lived experience than as an ascribed status, positioned as a background attribute rather than an actively inhabited identity. This mirrors the form of passive inheritance noted earlier in Section 5.1 (see (8): "Me being Kurdish, I was just born into it really"), where ethnicity is acknowledged as a matter of birth rather than actively constructed through everyday practice. Ravîn underscores this passivity by framing his identity as something he has been "told […] because of [his] parents" rather than something he has chosen or embodied, signalling a form of heritage transmission that is informational rather than experiential.

For Aron, Kurdishness was initially tied to tangible, communal experiences facilitated by his father. He recalls that "to be Kurdish" meant being "with your family," attending weddings, visiting relatives, and spending time with his grandmother. These interactions formed the main channels through which he "knew the community and the culture." However, this connection weakened after his parents' separation and his grandmother's death:

> (18) **Aron**: I think to be Kurdish, I think it means to be with your family. A lot of it is just centred around, like, family, uh, marriage, things like that. It is only really like how I've known the community and, like, the culture through. [...] A lot of my ties to being Kurdish was through my dad. My mum and my dad split… I do not really see my dad anymore. And he is the one who was like the big tie to Kurdish culture and all that stuff. He would always take us to weddings. He would always, like, take us to our cousin's house. […] Nowadays, my mum is not really into that. […] When it comes to the connection with being Kurdish is, um, it feels like it is also tied to my grandma, she has passed away now, but, like, that was, like, a Kurdish woman, like, through and through.

As he explains in (18), his father "was the big tie to Kurdish culture," but following the split, his interest in the culture diminished. In this account, Kurdishness is experienced as relational and event-based, grounded in specific people, gatherings, and social rituals rather than abstract notions of heritage. Its transmission is contingent on active participation in communal life, and when those links are disrupted, engagement fades. Unlike Ravîn's more detached stance, Aron's sense of identity is not absent but attenuated—coloured by memory and loss, and dependent on connections that have since been fractured. His narrative illustrates how changes in family structure can both nurture and erode heritage ties, and how its absence can weaken active involvement.

Beyond passive or fractured forms of inheritance, some participants described a more affectively grounded attachment to Kurdishness, which is rooted in family values, emotional closeness, and a sense of continuity. In these accounts, Kurdishness is seen as inseparable from family life, embedded in everyday routines, relationships, and shared values.

Sîpan, for example, articulates a clear connection between his Kurdish identity and the formative role of family:

> (19) **Sîpan**: What Kurdish is for me, is my root and my heritage. […] For me, I mean as for everyone, ethnicity is your childhood, your heritage defines where you are from. Everything for me that is Kurdish is back with my family.

Kurdishness in (19) is defined through his roots and upbringing. His narrative situates identity firmly within the domestic sphere, portraying family as both the source and custodian of heritage. He signals that while his definition is grounded in his own experience, he perceives it as broadly applicable ("as for everyone"). In this framing, heritage is not a static label but a lived continuity that begins in childhood and is sustained through interaction with family members. His emphasis on early life echoes perspectives that see ethnic identity as maintained through ongoing socialisation and the drawing of symbolic boundaries, rather than through fixed biological traits (Barth 1969). The home, in this sense, becomes the primary site where Kurdishness is embodied, learned, and reproduced.

Similarly, Larya links her sense of Kurdishness to both history and lived experience, emphasising the importance of everyday routines and affective encounters in sustaining it:

> (20) **Larya**: For me, [being Kurdish] is my culture, my history, where my family and I come from. That is what being Kurdish means to me. I mean, going out with, like, my

> relatives, family friends, who are also Kurdish. And just sharing food and, like, that feels very Kurdish to me. That is what it is to me. And going to Newroz and that and being able to express myself.

Her account shows how identity can be anchored in seemingly ordinary yet sensory-rich experiences. These moments, woven into the rhythms of daily life, make Kurdishness felt and lived rather than abstractly claimed. While her narrative may appear similar to Aron's in (18)—with both linking Kurdishness to family gatherings and community events—the key difference lies in continuity. For Aron, these practices were disrupted by changes in family structure, leading to a gradual weakening of his engagement. For Larya, by contrast, they remain actively sustained, extending beyond her immediate family circle. The routines she describes—sharing meals, gathering with relatives, attending celebrations—form part of the embodied dispositions that Bourdieu (1990: 60) terms habitus, providing regular spaces in which she can actively "express [her]self." Unlike Ravîn, for whom Kurdishness is primarily where "[his] parents come from," Larya frames it as equally her own point of origin.

Agît offers a further dimension, framing Kurdishness as a moral and interpersonal ethic shaped by his upbringing:

> (21) **Agît**: What it means to be Kurdish to me is […] one of the reasons why I am so kind, just from the cultural values that are espoused from a young age. I feel as though my family passed off, like, a lot of virtue […] being a Kurd is that kind of thought of you should be kind to the person across from you, treat others how you want to be treated and such. […] It is not necessarily like a phase system, but more so a cultural fabric.

In (21), cultural inheritance is expressed not through language or public practices, but through ethics and interpersonal conduct. Agît's use of a "cultural fabric" points to a deeply embedded moral framework, passed on through family life, that shapes how he engages with others. He extends Kurdishness into the moral domain: kindness, reciprocity, and respect are positioned as learned cultural virtues, not just personal traits. In this way, Kurdishness becomes less about visible markers of ethnicity and more about an embodied value system, sustained in everyday interaction and resistant to erosion even outside explicitly Kurdish spaces. In contrast to the more distanced or disrupted identifications described previously, Sîpan, Larya, and Agît articulate a Kurdishness experienced not only as heritage but as a lived culture—carried beyond the home through everyday

practices and moral values. For these participants, identity is grounded in the intimacies and ethics of family life (Sengul 2016), yet also enriched by their own sense of self.

Alongside these affective and cultural type of inheritance, many participants also stressed the formative role of family history in shaping their identity. For them, Kurdishness is embedded not only in the rhythms of daily life but also in inherited historical narratives, collective memory, and a sense of ancestral continuity. This historical awareness often intensifies emotional attachment, particularly when framed through narratives of injustice, survival, and pride (McDowall 2004). It is also within this historically grounded strand of identity transmission that we find participants from more politicised family backgrounds, where Kurdishness is inseparable from political consciousness and collective struggle.

For Berfîn, Kurdishness is inseparable from the family narratives through which she first encountered her heritage. As she reflects previously in (3), her ethnicity forms a central part of her self-definition, shaped by an awareness of the oppression experienced by Kurds. In (22), she roots her identity in an awareness of historical denial and collective sacrifice, framing belonging as an act of both justice and remembrance:

> (22) **Berfîn**: I definitely think there is a big emotional aspect to [being Kurdish], especially knowing that we have been denied of our right to be who we are. There is definitely that sense of, like, justice, where you want to say this is who I am, this is where I am from, because there has been so much sacrifice for us to be able to say this. So, there is definitely an emotional attachment to it. […] There is a sense of pride, there is a sense of sadness, there is so much emotional attachment.

Her emphasis on "denial," "sacrifice," "emotional attachment" and the repeated "we" positions Kurdishness as a collective inheritance bound up with struggle. While she did not directly experience the historical injustices she describes, her account reflects a form of postmemory (Hirsch 2008)—an inherited, affect-laden memory transmitted through the narratives of previous generations, yet deeply internalised. This intergenerational framing makes Kurdishness not only a marker of origin but also a moral and political claim, sustained through pride, grief, and an act of justice and resistance against historical erasure.

Sîpan similarly locates his identity in a historically grounded narrative, one first transmitted through his parents' experiences and later expanded through his own reflection. In (23), he traces

this awareness to both the intimate recounting of war and displacement, and to a broader civilisational history:

> (23) **Sîpan**: My parents tell me a lot about the history of Kurdish people. […] And also one of the things that really make me proud of my background is the source of civilization. We know that 12.000 years ago, there was not any agricultural anything and uh, all of a sudden it appeared in Mesopotamia. So I do think being from the Fertile Crescent or Kurdistan. I take great pride in its history. […] My identity really goes back to my parents' experiences and it is the same with everyone. My parents have seen a lot of wars. They have been in the Iraq and Iran War, Iraq and Kuwait, ISIS. And they tell me about it.

In this case, historical knowledge is framed as both inherited and actively cultivated—rooted in parental testimony but extended by his own engagement with a deeper past. His reference to Mesopotamia situates Kurdishness within a long civilisational arc, turning ancestry into a source of pride and legitimacy. In his later comments (24), this historical grounding becomes intertwined with a set of moral and cultural values:

> (24) **Sîpan**: If there were more investments, if there were more active appreciation of the history, then we would know who we are better. […] I think the Kurdish people, by nature and by culture, we are very open. […] We have lived in the Middle East for thousands of years with different nations. We live with Kurds, Persians. Jews, Arabs. But the Kurds are more open. I think they have been open-minded throughout history. For example, in the Middle East, a lot of people are like 'Newroz [New Year] is actually our celebration.' […] They celebrate Newroz in their own way and they claim it is purely Persian or even some Turks, they say 'Newroz belongs to us.' But with the Kurds, they have always said 'everyone is welcome.' So the Kurds have seen celebrations as celebrations, not only as cultural possessions, because we have a culture that is very wide, that we do acknowledge sharing a celebration will not take our identity away from us.

In this account, history is not a static inheritance but a living resource through which he comes to know himself. It is both a foundation and a guide, shaping present-day ethics as well as self-understanding (cf. Agît in (21)). For Sîpan, this historical inheritance is a source of pride, openness, and resilience, which are qualities that he sees as central to what it means to be Kurdish.

In Larya's case, historical consciousness is explicitly gendered, with women's resistance serving as a powerful entry point into Kurdish identity:

> (25) **Larya**: I feel like another part of what made me really interested and closer to my identity was seeing female soldiers and how highly women are held throughout history. […] Women are portrayed as strong and powerful, which is is not seen much in the Middle East.

For Larya, the figure of the Kurdish woman—"strong and powerful"—functions as both inspiration and affirmation. Her historical consciousness is therefore not only about ethnic pride, but also about embracing a feminist lineage within Kurdish history, shaping her diasporic subjectivity in ways that are both political and personal. This gendered pride is not unique to Larya: both Berfîn and Zîlan explicitly incorporate womanhood into their self-identification (see (1) and (3)), framing it as inseparable from their Kurdishness and as a further site of resistance and visibility.

Agît likewise draws on inherited political and historical narratives, framing Kurdishness as both a source of resilience and a lens for interpreting the world:

> (26) **Agît**: As a Kurd, I feel like we have quite a unique perspective on the things that happen globally from the fact that, obviously there is the colonial aspect of our identity through the fact that we are also one of the most revolutionary groups of people in the world. It leads to quite a diverse mix and allows me to have quite a bunch of social insight that also comes from me being a Kurd. […] Resilience is part of our genes. With being Kurdish to me comes a level of inner strength. […] That's where my ancestry is from. That's where my history is from.

In (26), Kurdishness is presented as a multi-layered inheritance. The "colonial aspect" and "revolutionary" tradition are not abstract political categories for Agît, but embedded elements of a collective past that shape how he interprets present-day global events. His description of Kurds as possessing a "unique perspective" suggests that historical consciousness is not merely retrospective but actively informs his worldview and "social insight." When he mentions "resilience" as part of "[his] genes," he draws on an essentialising yet affectively powerful metaphor, framing endurance and inner strength as core features of Kurdish identity. In this sense, ancestry and history are not only sources of ethnic pride but also reservoirs of moral and psychological resources in the present.

Across participants, Kurdishness is thus rooted not only in the everyday practices and affective bonds of family life, but also in the historical legacies transmitted across generations. Intergenerational narratives of struggle, resilience, and pride—whether centred on collective survival, moral values, or gendered forms of resistance—serve as interpretive frameworks through which the present is understood and the future imagined (Hirsch 2008; Lamont & Molnár 2002). These transmissions extend beyond factual recollections of the past: they are reinterpreted in the diasporic context, enabling Kurdish identity to operate both as a personal inheritance and as a shared, historically grounded project (Haig 2004; Alinia 2004; Bocheńska & Ghaderi 2023).

While all participants were exposed to some degree of Kurdish cultural and historical heritage at home, the nature and intensity of this inheritance varied considerably. For some, parental experiences of conflict, displacement, or political repression meant that Kurdishness was communicated not only through traditions and emotional bonds, but also through explicitly politicised worldviews. In households like those of Zîlan, Aryan, and Berfîn, nationalist discourse, political activism, and engagement with the Kurdish struggle formed an integral part of everyday life (McDowall 2004).

Zîlan offers a particularly vivid example of this politicised inheritance:

> (27) **Zîlan**: My family, they have grown me up in a Kurdish household […] they support the Rojava right now, they support HDP, YPG, they support like all those groups. And they bought out on me too, so I also support them. […] When I was younger, they used to take me to rallies and all that, in England. […] I know much more about Kurdistan and politics than I do in Britain. Because I do not support, like, Britain. I support my nation and Kurdistan. So being Kurdish is also to support my ethnicity and my people and to never, like, let them, like, let them down. […] It is like carrying the soul of the past and a promise for the future.

Her account in (27) reflects an explicit alignment with her parents' politics, where support for Kurdish liberation movements is not only a political stance but a moral commitment. Zîlan's knowledge of "Kurdistan and politics" is presented as more significant—and more authentic—than any equivalent understanding of Britain, underlining her rejection of British national identification in favour of Kurdish solidarity. Her description of "carrying the soul of the past and a promise for the future" draws together historical memory, moral responsibility, and transnational social fields

(Levitt 2001). Although she was born in London, she remains actively embedded in the political, emotional, and moral lifeworlds of her parents' place of origin (Phinney et al. 2001).

Aryan's account also situates political discussion as a normalised feature of family life:

(28) **Aryan**: We have things like big meet-ups with my family and everyone speaks politics and speaks about other different things.

This brief comment points to a household in which political conversation is not an occasional event but, embedded in everyday interaction, shared across generations as part of the family's communicative norms as naturally as other topics of discussion.

For Berfîn, politics emerges even more explicitly as a formative dimension of family influence:

(29) **Berfîn**: In my teenage years, I have grown up in a political family. My parents were also really involved with the Kurdish community.

Later in the interview, she links this upbringing to a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility, shaped by the historical trauma recounted within her family and by the relative safety of her upbringing in Europe:

(30) **Berfîn**: I think it is up to us as the generation born in… safety, in Europe, to pass it on as well. We have been through so much. It needs to be recognised, we cannot stay quiet. I think remaining silent is what history has expected from us. They have been killing us by silencing us. […] I know I am here right now, but I wish more so to make an impact internationally.

Her repeated use of "we" and "us" underscores a collective orientation that mirrors the politicised perspective of the first generation. The reference to "silencing" reflects the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Hirsch 2008), where Kurdishness is not only a cultural inheritance but also a moral and political obligation. Like Zîlan in (27), who describes being Kurdish as "carrying the soul of the past and a promise for the future," Berfîn frames identity as an active commitment to continue the struggle initiated by previous generations, transforming inherited history into a mandate for action (Levitt 2001).

By contrast, for Rêzan, growing up in a strongly political household did not lead to deeper engagement, but to a sense of discomfort and detachment from his roots:

> (32) **Rêzan**: My parents were involved in [the political parties] when they were more active and younger. And they used to tell me a lot about the horrible stories, and so on. But I always stayed away from it. I never felt safe, comfortable, really that welcome. And I never really participated in it. I think hearing their stories growing up did make me feel more nervous about saying that I am Kurdish, because I did not really know how people would react to it. […] Now that I am older, I understand and I am proud of what we, as a people, have been through.

Unlike Zîlan, Berfîn, or Sîpan—who describe inherited narratives in terms of pride, strength, or openness—Rêzan recalls "horrible stories," an adjective that casts the past in terms of fear and threat. Where others frame their parents' political histories as empowering, he associates them with danger and unease, making Kurdishness feel risky to claim in public. This negative framing appears to have delayed his engagement until adulthood, when pride began to replace apprehension. His narrative highlights how politicised family memory can have unintended effects—producing hesitation or emotional distance rather than immediate alignment.

These accounts demonstrate that family is a primary site where Kurdishness is shaped—not only through language and cultural practices, but also through the transmission of historical memory and political consciousness. In some households, these inheritances foster a deep alignment with a politicised Kurdish identity; in others they invite more cautious engagement, critical negotiation, or a gradual redefinition of what Kurdishness means in the diasporic context.

Eren's experience resonates with this theme of apprehension, though the source lay not in overt politicisation but in the legacy of fear surrounding it. Rather than inheriting nationalist narratives, Eren grew up in a household shaped by protective silence—his parents' cautious approach rooted in their own encounters with repression in Turkey. His mother, raised in Istanbul, had grown up in an environment where Kurdish language and identity were largely erased; his father, shaped by direct experiences of state repression in Turkey, prioritised security and stability in London over political or cultural expression:

> (32) **Eren**: My dad went through a lot of hardship in Turkey because of being Kurdish. He told me that his grandfather could not speak Kurdish with his father, because he was so

> scared. […] He moved to London, and just focused on creating a new life. My mum grew up in Istanbul. When she was a child, no one spoke Kurmancî around her. So she only knew Turkish. Once she came here, she started only speaking in English. That is why I grew up speaking English — I did not grow up with my Kurdish identity.

Eren's experience was shaped by the legacy of fear surrounding politicisation itself—a reluctance to express Kurdishness openly due to the trauma, silencing, and danger historically associated with it. This avoidance extended to how heritage was described; his parents did not deny their heritage, but spoke about it in depoliticised, geographic terms, avoiding explicit identification:

> (33) **Eren**: Now that I think of it, they only used to tell me that they came from Turkey. They would not say that they are Turkish, but come from Turkey.

It was only in early adulthood that Eren began to reclaim his Kurdishness—learning the language, exploring historical narratives, and engaging with Kurdish communities in London. This self-directed process had a reciprocal effect: his parents, previously disengaged, began to re-engage with their roots, encouraged by his initiative:

> (34) **Eren**: Now, here I am, speaking the language, still knowing so much about our history and stuff, more than my parents would have ever taught me—in a way that they are actually very proud, they speak to me quite fondly about how happy they are that they see me looking into our history and learning these things by myself. And that is because the culture is still going to come through regardless. You know what? They actually try to speak [Kurmancî] a bit more and be more interested in Kurdishness.

Eren's case shows that silence itself can be a form of inheritance—rooted in memory of represseion, fear, protection, and the desire to move forward. This inheritance proved yet to be flexible: through his own efforts, Eren transformed it into an engaged and affirmative identification. His experience also reflects the influence of place: living in London provided the safety and opportunities for such a reversal to take root (Gallis et al. 2005). His own engagement reactivated his parents' interest, transforming a legacy of guardedness into one of renewed cultural participation (McDowall 2004). In this way, Eren exemplifies an intergenerational shift, where second-generation engagement reactivates first-generation memory.

These varied forms of inheritance—whether expressed through political activism, historical narratives, cultural practice, or protective silence—shape how participants reinterpret and live their Kurdishness in everyday life. While their depth and affective resonance vary, these narratives share an emphasis on family life, sensory and moral experience, and personal relationships as the primary vehicles of Kurdish identity. In line with research on intergenerational transmission of identity (Phinney et al. 2001; Levitt 2001), they demonstrate that heritage can be maintained, reinterpreted, or muted according to the emotional tone, frequency, and framing of family narratives. The participants' accounts illustrate a spectrum between passively acknowledged and actively sustained inheritance. At one end are cases such as Ravîn's, where Kurdishness exists largely as a background fact of ancestry, and Aron's, where an initially active connection through family life was later disrupted by loss. Further along are examples like Larya's, where everyday practices and communal gatherings actively sustain cultural belonging, and Agît's, where moral values and interpersonal ethics are consciously attributed to Kurdish heritage. The more politicised cases integrate historical narratives, nationalist discourse, and collective memory into everyday life, making political consciousness an inseparable part of Kurdishness. By contrast, for Rêzan and Eren, family histories of danger and repression produced more hesitant forms of inheritance: in Rêzan's case, politicised stories initially generated fear and avoidance; in Eren's, protective silence muted cultural and political expression until adulthood.

What emerges is that "being Kurdish" in the diaspora is neither a uniform inheritance nor a fixed trait. It is a socially constructed and relational identity, shaped by how culture, history, politics, and even silence are transmitted and taken up (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1996). Whether maintained through active engagement, disrupted by loss, or reframed in later life, these types of inheritance provide the frameworks—emotional, moral, and political—through which participants negotiate belonging in both Kurdish and British contexts. The next section turns to how such negotiations play out beyond the family, focusing on community, peers, and everyday forms of engagement.

5.2.2. Embodying identity in everyday life: Community, peers, and engagement

While familial inheritance provides the initial framework for how second-generation Kurds in London understand their Kurdishness, identity is not fixed within the walls of the home. It is continually reworked through the practices, relationships, and interactions that fill everyday life. Public and semi-public spaces—whether community centres, cultural festivals, political rallies, friendship groups, or online platforms—offer arenas in which inherited attachments are sustained,

adapted, or, in some cases, diminished (Hall 1990). In these contexts, Kurdishness moves from a primarily private inheritance to a lived, visible, and negotiated presence. Participation in British spaces in London can thus reinforce inherited values and narratives, but it can also challenge or transform them, depending on the individual's experiences and the kinds of networks they inhabit.

These practices are often shaped by the forms of inheritance discussed in the previous section. Participants with politicised upbringings may gravitate towards structured activism or transnational political networks (Mahmod 2019); those whose identity is grounded in cultural or affective attachments may seek out social and festive gatherings; while others, inheriting silence or ambivalence, may engage selectively or symbolically, choosing when and how Kurdishness is expressed in a multicultural British public (see Section 3 for a discussion of London's cultural diversity). In this way, everyday life in London becomes a key site of identity work, where belonging is not only preserved but actively negotiated in relation to both Kurdish and British spheres (Anthers 2022; Pemberton & Phillimore 2018; Wessendorf 2019).

For participants raised in politicised households, this inherited consciousness often translates into sustained involvement in Kurdish political and cultural activism in London. Rather than detaching from the struggles of the first generation, individuals such as Zîlan, Berfîn, and Aryan extend those commitments through participation in local campaigns, community centres, and political discussions—often with an eye toward both diasporic visibility and transnational solidarity.

Zîlan, for instance, explicitly links her identity to a sense of responsibility toward Kurdistan and its future (see also (27)):

> (35) **Zîlan**: I want to make an impact here, but I also want to make an impact at home in Kurdistan.

Currently active in a Kurdish community centre in her town, Zîlan's desire for political engagement is not confined to the UK but extends across borders, reflecting a form of transnational activism in which the diasporic and homeland spheres are mutually constitutive (Vertovec 2007). For her, Kurdishness is not a static label but a call to action—an identity that demands participation, advocacy, and visible commitment in both local and global arenas.

Similarly, Berfîn (see also (30)) locates her sense of self in active engagement with Kurdish community and political spaces in London. Her narrative highlights how participating in events—such as talks at universities and community discussions—transformed her Kurdishness from something largely private into something vocal, embodied, and publicly enacted:

(36) **Berfîn**: We have the Kurdish community centres in London. […] We used to have a lot of talks at universities and I was about 14 and I would go there. […] I realised that nobody is really aware or nobody is talking about [Kurdish people]. I told myself that I was going to understand it better, understand the history better, how did this happen. Interacting with other Kurds about politics, I think that is how I became more open about my identity and realised I need to be more vocal about it rather than quiet. […] I think it is up to us as the second generation to pass it now. […] And it allows me to have a stronger sense of identity by engaging in the politics.

For Berfîn, becoming politically vocal is inseparable from becoming more Kurdish—suggesting that community engagement is not merely an expression of identity but a means of shaping and deepening it (Jenkins 1996). Her statement underscores an intergenerational ethic of responsibility: the belief that the second generation must carry forward the struggle, even if its forms differ. These individuals do not simply inherit a political identity; they actively perform and reconfigure it within the diasporic British sphere.

However, not all participants are actively engaged in Kurdish community life, nor do they necessarily frame Kurdishness through political participation or collective mobilisation. For some, involvement with Kurdish organisations or networks is minimal, and even awareness of existing community structures emerges only gradually—or remains peripheral.

Aron, for example, expresses only limited familiarity with local Kurdish networks, noting that his understanding of Kurdish community life extends little beyond his immediate family:

(37) **Aron**: I think there is a community centre not far from where I live. But it is like, it is only been recent where I have been finding out that there is, like, communities... of Kurdish people, besides, you know, my family.

This stands in marked contrast to the politically embedded narratives of participants like Berfîn, for whom community spaces function as arenas of activism and belonging. Even when describing the same event—namely the police raid on a Kurdish community centre in London—the accounts of two participants reveal sharply different orientations.

Berfîn recalls the incident as a collective experience, one that brought people together and affirmed communal solidarity:

(38) **Berfîn**: Back in November, actually, a Kurdish community centre was raided by the police. And for a few days, the police did not let the community back into the community centre. And a few friends got arrested and we had a lot of support from people. […] During that time, you know, families were coming out, they were giving us tea because it was very cold.

Her repeated use of the first-person plural signals a strong affective and symbolic identification with the Kurdish community—even without formal affiliation to that particular centre. The event is framed as "ours," the struggle as shared, reflecting an attachment to "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983): collective identities maintained not only through direct participation, but also through shared narratives, symbols, and emotional investments that bind individuals together across space.

By contrast, Ravîn, who witnessed the same incident, speaks from a more observational distance:

(39) **Ravîn**: I do not know a lot about the communities, I do not take part in them to be honest. I know one… The police attacked a Kurdish community in my area in London, five or six months ago, last winter. That was probably like one of a few times in London where all the Kurds were thinking they were not as safe as they might think they are here. So yeah, that was probably one of the only challenges, and the future, maybe it might happen again, maybe not, but yeah.

Ravîn's account reflects a more detached positionality. His reference to "the Kurds" and the third-person plural positions him at the margins of collective belonging. Whereas Berfîn narrates the raid as a moment of collective resistance, Ravîn in (39) frames it as an external event—acknowledged but not integrated into his own sense of self. Note that even the descriptions differ: for instance, Berfîn recalls precisely that the event took place in November, whereas Ravîn refers to it more vaguely as "five or six months ago." These contrasts illustrate that everyday Kurdishness in the diaspora is not defined solely by shared ethnicity, but by varying degrees of access to—and investment in—communal infrastructures. These patterns are closely tied to the forms of inheritance discussed in the previous section. Those raised in politicised households are often more attuned to the existence of Kurdish networks and more motivated to participate in them, viewing such spaces

as natural extensions of their family's commitments. For participants like Zîlan and Berfîn, community spaces in London serve as vital arenas for identity-building and political agency; for others, such as Aron and Ravîn, Kurdishness is navigated more individually, with community ties remaining peripheral or occasional.

In London, this divergence is shaped by the city's unique combination of opportunity and fragmentation. On one hand, the capital hosts a dense array of Kurdish political, cultural, and social institutions, providing potential sites for activism, heritage transmission, and mutual support (see Section 2.2.1). On the other hand, its scale, diversity, and geographic dispersal mean that these networks can remain invisible or inaccessible to those outside their immediate circles. For some, London's Kurdish infrastructure enables deep immersion in communal life; for others, its multiculturalism fosters a more fragmented, occasional, or observational relationship to Kurdishness.

Yet, even where such spaces are visible, diversity does not necessarily translate into cohesion. The Kurdish networks participants encounter in London are often dominated by Kurds from Bakur (North Kurdistan), reflecting both historical migration patterns and the broader geopolitical fragmentation of the Kurdish people across the four nation-states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. This fragmentation, rooted in displacement, repression, and regional politics, is reproduced in the diaspora through separate community associations divided along lines of regional origin, dialect, and political affiliation. Instead of a unified Kurdish front, participants often navigate a segmented community landscape, engaging with distinct networks tied to Bakur, Bashur, Rojava, or Rojhilat (see Section 2.2).

Aryan, for example, regularly attends a community centre affiliated with Kurds from Bakur. He expresses discomfort with Bashuri Kurds, whose linguistic and political orientations he perceives as signs of disconnection or even inauthenticity:

> (40) **Aryan**: We have a Kurdish community centre which I am part of. […] To be honest, I do not like mixing it with Bashuris. I think they are a bit… They are funny because let's see, if you go to the shop, they are Arabs. But they are Bashuri. And you speak to them and they speak to you in Arabic and act Arab. As you say you are Kurdish, for business, they say, oh, we are Kurdish as well. I am like, wait a minute, you were fully speaking in Arabic. And if you ask them where they are from, they are like, 'I am from Iraq.' Hold on. And they act so surprised if you do not know Soranî. It is not like it is an international language that everyone should know. They are just so full of themselves, so they do not understand.

Aryan's account in (40) illustrates a form of intra-diasporic boundary-making (Wimmer 2008), in which perceptions of linguistic authenticity, political commitment, and cultural performance become markers for distinguishing "us" from "them" (McDowall 2004: 457). Strikingly, when speaking about Kurds from Bashur, he avoids using the terms *Kurd* or *Kurdish* altogether—an omission that reinforces the symbolic distancing he describes. His frustration reflects the persistence of regionally inflected hierarchies from the Middle East within the diaspora, where language choice (e.g. Soranî vs. Kurmancî vs. Arabic) is interpreted not merely as a practical matter of communication, but as a visible sign of alignment with, or detachment from, Kurdishness itself.

Rather than encountering London as a unified space of Kurdish solidarity, several participants described networks segmented along lines of regional origin, dialect, and political affiliation. In a way, these boundaries echo the fragmentation of their parents' generation. These divisions—rooted in the geopolitical fragmentation of Kurdistan and reinforced by divergent migration histories—are reproduced in exile, shaping how Kurdishness is lived and policed within the second generation. Strong affiliations with particular Kurdish regions or traditions can reinforce social boundaries in a diasporic context rather than dissolve them. These intra-Kurdish tensions may underscore the challenge of forging diasporic unity in the absence of a nation-state (see Section 2.2) —an issue that continues to shape how Kurdishness is imagined in exile.

However, some second-generation Kurds actively resist the reproduction of these intra-diasporic boundaries. Zara's account reflects a critical awareness of such divisions, which she views as constraining collective engagement even among those who share a common ethnic identity. While she grew up in a politicised household, she distances herself from inherited exclusionary attitudes. Rather than withdrawing, she works to subvert these divisions by fostering inclusive, youth-led, and culturally generative forms of participation. Through initiatives like the Kurdish Creative Community (KCC) and her plans for inter-regional Newroz celebrations, she promotes a reimagined model of Kurdishness—one grounded in inter-dialectal solidarity, artistic collaboration, and forward-looking cultural development:

(41) **Zara**: I realised that teasing into this narrative all the time that, you know, we are always at war and we have had a lot of genocides. We have a lot of issues now. We have a lot of suppression and prostitution. I remember thinking, I was like, what positive is this going to do, you know? For people tomorrow, like, if people that are our age in 2025 are still talking over and over and over again about things that happened in the 80s, we are never

> going to move forward. You know, we are never going to be able to be taken seriously and we are always going to be in a very weird nostalgia for trauma. And I think that is when I really wanted to get into the community, everything that young people do nowadays like Kurdish people doing so important. It is the more you think about the future and rather than just always think about the past because I think sometimes it is what keeps the Kurdish culture behind. For me, engaging in the community is my resistance to that, sort of, like traumatic past. But it is not my parents' political parties, it is the youth's unification. It has to set at one point, it has to look forward.

Rather than rejecting her political inheritance, Zara reworks it into a forward-facing vision in which the second generation are not only custodians of collective memory but also agents of transformation. In place of what she calls a "nostalgia for trauma," she advocates for a politics of futurity, where cultural vitality and creative collaboration become vehicles for unity (i.e. "the youth's unification"). Her approach illustrates how Kurdish spaces in London can be reimagined as sites of creative recomposition, where generational change opens the possibility of integration without erasure, solidarity without uniformity, and relevance without being bound to the past. In this sense, Zara's vision suggests that London's cultural diversity can serve as a resource for cultivating a stronger—or at least more unified—sense of Kurdishness (Abobeker 2016: 167). Rather than reinforcing divisions imported from the homeland, the city's pluralistic environment offers opportunities for inter-regional solidarity that may be harder to achieve in more homogeneous or politically rigid contexts. In such an environment, living within a completely alien cultural setting can sharpen the awareness of a distinct Kurdish identity, enabling the emergence of new, more inclusive forms of Kurdishness (Fischer-Neumann 2014; Simon & Grabow 2010).

While many participants describe regularly navigating between Kurdish and British spaces, a few express minimal engagement with broader British society or peers from other ethnic backgrounds. Instead, they prefer to remain within Kurdish social circles, seeking connection and recognition from those who share their background. For these individuals, belonging is grounded less in multicultural integration than in cultural affinity and perceived similarity—shaped by both upbringing and experiences of racialised difference.

Zîlan, for instance, describes her everyday friendships as almost exclusively Kurdish, viewing this as a natural extension of her family environment and the growth of the Kurdish population in London:

(42) **Zîlan**: I mainly have Kurdish friends […] I think it is easier to connect. I have my whole family here and there is a lot of new Kurds moving over and they have a lot of kids, so obviously I think there is going to be more of us. So, I mean, I think that would be really nice because you get people to connect with and everything like that.

Zîlan's account in (42) reflects an orientation toward Kurdish spaces even within the highly diverse environment of London. Rather than seeing the city's multiculturalism as an incentive to branch out socially, she anticipates that her networks will expand through the arrival of "a lot of new Kurds," which she sees as an opportunity to "connect" more easily. This framing suggests that Kurdishness in her everyday life is sustained through the expectation of organic community growth, where shared language, traditions, and family ties are presumed to foster closeness without the need to seek out relationships beyond her ethnic group. The emphasis on "connecting" suggests that Kurdishness, for her, is a primary basis for forming trust and familiarity, and that such ties are more easily built with those who share her heritage than with non-Kurds.

Aryan articulates this even more explicitly, saying that he finds it difficult to relate to non-Kurds and prefers to maintain distance from those outside his ethnic group:

(43) **Aryan**: That is the thing about me. I have not really mixed in that much. I usually try to stick to my people and, like to traditions. […] I have always found it hard to integrate because, I mean, we have different mindsets. I did learn English and stuff like that of course. But no, I always, I was always close to my Kurdish roots.

Aryan's narrative in (43) reveals a more deliberate form of social boundary-making. While Zîlan's connections emerge organically from the Kurdish networks around her, Aryan actively "tries to stick to [his] people," positioning integration into British social life as potentially incompatible with preserving his cultural roots. His reference to "different mindsets" suggests that he sees fundamental cultural differences between himself and non-Kurds. This perspective frames Kurdishness not only as a heritage but as a worldview that requires conscious maintenance, even at the cost of limiting broader social interactions.

A similar orientation appears in Berfîn's account, where she gravitates toward those who "look like" her and expresses a sense of not fully belonging in more mainstream British social spaces. Her identification with Kurdishness is strengthened not only by cultural familiarity but by how she is seen—and not seen—by others:

(44) **Berfîn**: To be honest, I always look for people that look like me, because that is where I feel like myself. When I am with other cultures, there is always a sense of I do not belong. […] I think I identify more as Kurdish because it is more at face value, people see that first. And I think certain, like, traits I have, even though I have lived here all my life, people do see something a bit different, that is a bit non-British.

Berfîn's account in (44) positions identity as something shaped not only from within but through how one is seen by others (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1996). She notes that she identifies "more as Kurdish" because "people see that first"—suggesting that external perception precedes and reinforces her self-understanding. Even after a lifetime in Britain, she is read as "different," as "non-British," in ways that mark her as outside the cultural mainstream. This continual external positioning shapes how she navigates social spaces: she gravitates toward those who "look like" her, where the risk of misrecognition or exclusion is reduced (Malesevic 2006). In this sense, her Kurdishness is sustained not solely by heritage or choice, but also by the social gaze—by the fact that in everyday encounters, she is already perceived as belonging elsewhere.

These patterns of selective proximity and withdrawal from non-Kurdish networks can be read as expressions of attachment to participants' own "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), defined in terms of region, or shared experience. As discussed in Section 5.1, these respondents describe Britishness primarily in geographic or legal terms—such as holding a British passport—without attaching it to a deeper sense of belonging. In this sense, possession of a passport does not equate to identification. This aligns with separationist tendencies (Berry 1997), in which individuals maintain their heritage culture while minimising interaction with the host society. Such orientations may stem from the "inability or unwillingness" to be fully accepted by the "host society," fostering feelings of alienation, exclusion, or a sharpened sense of "difference" (Vertovec 1997: 4). In some cases, this distance appears intertwined with political consciousness. As Tosi (1984: 116) observes, dissident nationalist groups in the diaspora can exhibit stronger attachments to their ethnic identity. Here, identity is not only sustained but intensified by diasporic location: participants feel their distinctiveness more acutely through the lens of what they are not (Hall 1991). "Physically located [the homeland,]" they remain "mentally anchored to a specific people" and place, reinforcing "ethnic and kinship bonds" (Kaya 2012: 167). This dynamic helps to explain why, for some, separation from non-Kurdish networks is not merely a product of habit, but a deliberate stance rooted in both self-definition and the external definition.

This preference for cultural proximity often extends beyond social life into participants' civic and political orientations toward Britain. Aryan, for instance, articulates a guest–host logic in his reflections (Rosello 2001)—describing gratitude for Britain's support but framing it as an act of kindness rather than a right:

> (45) **Aryan**: I owe a lot to the country. I feel like you have to be grateful to a certain extent, like, if they take you in and they help you out. So, now I am contributing to the economy and I do feel like I bring something to the system as well, if that makes sense. I feel like because we have been treated so bad back home, that if anyone gives us a hand, we are very grateful because we see it as not like something that should be given to us, but something that is like, it is just people do it out of their kindness, not like we need it or like we deserve it.

For Aryan in (45), Britain is positioned as the host—a benevolent figure that has "taken in" Kurds and "helped out" of kindness—while Kurds, including himself who was born in the UK, are guests who owe gratitude in return. This framing does more than express politeness: it constructs a moral relationship with implicit boundaries, in which the host is not obliged to provide refuge and the guest is not entitled to it. Any support is seen as an act of generosity rather than a right. This logic implicitly limits claims to full belonging. A guest can be welcomed, but remains aware of being in someone else's house (Rosello 2001). Tellingly, he defines Britishness in functional and material terms. Britishness, for him, is simply what Kurdishness could not be because of past history (Hall 1991): a provider of stability, opportunity, and security. It does not carry the emotional weight or rootedness of his Kurdish identity, which he describes as his "root" and his "life" in (46):

> (46) **Aryan**: Britain has supported me in ways Kurdistan could not have. Kurdishness is my root and my life. London is a place to express it.

His orientation to life in London reflects minimal investment in integration, reinforced both by his preference to remain within Kurdish social circles and by the solitary nature of his work as a truck driver, which limits sustained interaction with British peers. Even when imagining his future, he positions himself outside the long-term British social landscape, expressing a desire to "return" to Kurdistan:

(47) **Aryan**: I want to go back home. If I ever have kids I do not want my kids to grow up in this country. Because I know that they might lose themselves and their identity. That would not happen here you know, they would somewhat be linked to their heritage.

The wish to "return" in (47) is more typically associated with first-generation migrants (King & Christou 2010), yet Aryan's case illustrates how it can persist into the second generation when homeland attachment is politicised and central to self-definition. In the Kurdish case, this desire is complicated by statelessness and the geopolitical fragmentation of "home," which exists as both a tangible location and an imagined space. This positioning might underscore how the "return" ideal functions less as a concrete migration plan than as a symbolic act of resisting assimilation and affirming Kurdishness in a diasporic context. Notably, Aryan uses "this country" to refer to England, while "here" denotes Kurdistan—a spatial inversion that symbolically centres Kurdistan as the locus of belonging, while positioning England as a temporary or less integral space. This linguistic shift reveals how, for some, the imagined homeland occupies the conceptual "present," even when lived experience is rooted in the diaspora.

Among the participants in this group, Aryan expresses the most explicit sense of civic indebtedness, with Zîlan and Berfîn expressing similar—but less pronounced—forms of gratitude. This sense of indebtedness appears rooted in their strong alignment with first-generation narratives of hardship and forced migration, which position Britain as a refuge rather than a homeland. In this framing, gratitude becomes an inherited duty rather than an affective attachment, reinforcing a guest–host dynamic in which membership is felt as conditional (Rosello 2001). Identification with Britishness is therefore mediated by exclusion, limited interaction, and the perception of Britain as a provider rather than a shared cultural home, while Kurdishness continues to function as the primary emotional and cultural anchor.

While some participants frame London primarily as a place to preserve Kurdishness—often alongside a sense of indebtedness to Britain—others see the city as a place where the two identities are mutually reinforcing. For them, London's multicultural landscape not only accommodates but actively affirms Kurdishness, allowing it to be expressed with confidence and recognised by others. Rather than treating London and Kurdishness as distinct spheres, they view them as intertwined, each strengthening the other.

For Agît, London's diversity functions as a space of recognition and mutual affirmation, particularly among other racialised groups whose own histories of marginalisation foster empathy and solidarity:

(48) **Agît**: There were many, many groups of people ranging from people from the Caribbean, through to Africa, etc... if you told them you are Kurdish, they would know exactly where you are, they would believe that you have a country and they would affirm your Kurdish identity. […] There is one rule that everyone knows: you do not call a Kurd a Turk. Which is, I think, a testament to how interconnected our struggle is with everyone else's and how many conversations we have with the communities around us because of our shared understanding of struggle. […] What it has meant for my Kurdish identity as a result is I affirm my Kurdish identity and my London identity very close to one another, and they are both very dear to my heart. […] I have felt more Kurdish because of the environment in London I find myself in, that affirms my Kurdish identity.

Agît's account positions London not simply as a host environment, but as a co-producer of identity. Recognition in (48) seems to be key: Kurdishness is validated in everyday encounters, particularly with other racialised groups who understand it in political and historical terms rather than through stereotypes or erasure. This recognition is reciprocal, built on shared narratives of struggle and resistance, and aligns with what Anthias (2002) terms translocational positionality—where identities are constructed and negotiated across multiple social locations, such as ethnicity, race, and political history. In this framework, London is not a neutral backdrop but an active site where Kurdishness is affirmed, performed, and sharpened through cross-community solidarity. In this sense, Agît's narrative stands in contrast to Aryan's. Whereas Aryan frames Britain through a guest–host logic—valuing it for the opportunities it provides while emotionally centring Kurdishness as something to preserve apart—Agît sees his London identity as inseparable from his Kurdish identity. For Aryan, Britishness is "what Kurdishness could not be:" a source of material support rather than emotional belonging. For Agît, Londonness is what Kurdishness can be when recognised: a lived, public, and mutually affirmed identity that gains strength precisely because it is embedded in the city's multicultural networks (Celebi, Verkuyten & Smyrnioti 2016: 1038).

Others, such as Araz and Larya, highlight how diverse social circles create opportunities to share their identity—often as a form of informal education. For Araz, these interactions are energising and affirming: rather than simply preserving Kurdishness in familiar spaces, he seeks out occasions to introduce it to those who might otherwise never encounter it. Consider the following:

(49) **Araz**: I grew up here, so naturally I have friends with very different backgrounds. But that is the fun about it. I love meeting these new people, because I want someone to become aware of what a Kurd is, who Kurds are, what Kurdish existence even means.

Kurdishness (49) is something to be shared, explained, and brought into new conversations. In this way, his identity is sustained not only through intra-Kurdish solidarity but through active engagement with non-Kurdish circles—turning everyday encounters into moments of cultural education.

Larya echoes this sense of responsibility, but her approach is grounded in acts of hospitality and the correction of misrecognition. She notes that many people either do not know what Kurdishness is or assume that Kurds are Turkish. For her, food and shared experience become tools for communicating a distinct identity:

(50) **Larya**: I talk about it a lot with my friends. […] I always tell my friends to come around if I am making, like, a Kurdish meal. […] People either do not know what it is or might think you are Turkish. So I think for me, it is about making sure other people know where I am from, but also get an understanding of what Kurdish even is. That is what it means to me a bit more—it is about making sure that if someone does not know, I will tell them.

Larya suggests an active guardianship over how Kurdishness is understood: misrecognition is met with explanation, and silence is countered with visibility. The participants see London's diversity as a platform for relational visibility (Brighenti 2017), where everyday socialising becomes an opportunity to represent and explain Kurdishness in ways that are personal, embodied, and responsive to context. This approach contrasts with the more boundary-maintaining strategies of participants such as Aryan, for whom cultural proximity to other Kurds is preferred and cross-cultural engagement remains minimal. Whereas the latter safeguards identity through selective association and political activism, Agît, Araz and Larya enact it through outward-facing connection—turning diversity itself into a means of sustaining and publicising Kurdishness. In this form, belonging is not defined by assimilation or withdrawal, but by an openness to being seen and understood by others—transforming casual encounters into acts of identity-making. Together, these accounts suggest that life in London's multicultural environment can strengthen rather than dilute ethnic identity (Celebi, Verkuyten & Smyrnioti 2016: 1038).

However, while some participants describe London's diversity as a space that supports and affirms Kurdishness, others suggest that this same multicultural environment can also encourage cultural dilution or even disidentification. For some, fitting in means stepping back from Kurdishness—either because of feelings of difference within Kurdish communities or out of a desire to blend into the broader urban social fabric.

Ravîn, for instance, values openness and cosmopolitanism, seeing London's diversity as an opportunity to engage with a wide range of cultures. His account presents a deliberate distancing from what he perceives as the insularity of parts of the Kurdish community, where social life remains largely confined to one's own ethnic group (cf. Aryan):

> (51) **Ravîn**: I heard a lot of comments from other people within the communities, they would only be friends with their own people. I am like, 'No, I would not' I try to talk to anyone, really. […] In London, yeah, my friends come from different areas of the world, like, Indian or Italian. I have some Kurdish friends, but we are not really close.

In (51), multiculturalism is embraced as a resource for broadening rather than reinforcing ethnic boundaries. Ravîn's looser connection to Kurdish networks appears partly circumstantial—reflecting the friendships he has formed in everyday life—but also ideological, stemming from a rejection of what he perceives as ethnic exclusivity. His orientation suggests a weaker form of ethnic maintenance, where Kurdishness is not abandoned but recast as one identity among many.

By contrast, Aron's disengagement from Kurdishness is more strategic and rooted in self-presentation. His description of "passing" as other ethnicities to avoid cultural confrontation or the burden of explanation reflects an identity management strategy shaped by the possibilities of London's pluralism:

> (52) **Aron**: I am racially ambiguous. I do not even have a pronounced Kurdish name. To be honest, for the longest time, I would not even say that I was Kurdish. There is a lot of immigrants in London, so it is a huge melting pot. You have all these different cultures, traditions—and I love that. I adopted their traditions also. But whenever I was, like, with Russian people, I would just say I am Russian. Yeah, I just wanted to fit in. It was easier than explaining what Kurdish is.

In Aron's case, the absence of immediately visible ethnic markers enables a fluidity of identification that would be unavailable to participants like Berfîn, whose Kurdishness is immediately legible "at face value" (see (44), Barth 1969; Jenkins 1996; Vertovec 1997). Where Berfîn embraces her visible ethnic features as a source of affirming her Kurdishness, Aron uses his ambiguity to sidestep it altogether (Goffman 1963). Rather than being immediately read as Kurdish, he can adapt how he presents himself, using ambiguity as a way to blend in. Note that he employs ambiguity to avoid defining "what Kurdish is," which reflects a certain passivity when compared to other participants who actively engage in articulating Kurdishness and making it visible.

Both cases highlight how London's diversity enables multiple—and sometimes opposing—identity strategies: Ravîn's outward-looking cosmopolitanism, which treats Kurdishness as one element of a broader cultural repertoire, and Aron's selective concealment, which privileges social ease over ethnic assertion. These patterns complicate the idea that multicultural contexts automatically sustain ethnic identity; they show instead that such environments can just as easily provide the conditions for loosening or reconfiguring ethnic ties, especially when individuals perceive those ties as restrictive or burdensome (cf. assimilationist tendencies, Berry's 1997). What is notable is that this assimilation is not simply the result of attraction to Britishness; rather, it is partly shaped by a disengagement from Kurdish communal life.

The sense of detachment from Kurdishness seems to extend to a deeper sense of alienation from Kurdish communities. Aron reflects critically on aspects of Kurdish culture he finds difficult to relate to, particularly those tied to reputation, obligation, and social conformity:

> (53) **Aron**: Having knowledge about all these cultures and stuff, I realise how much Kurdish traditions can be crazy sometimes. With my dad, I used to go to, like, I do not know, 50 weddings a year. […] He is so obsessed with his reputation. […] You go to these weddings and give a gift. They announce it on the microphone. He will give, like, £500, £600. Then at home I would ask for £5 to go out and he would say no. I am like, 'You just spent £600 on someone's wedding we do not even know.' It's craziness. Always chasing something.

His description of wedding culture (53) reveals a sense of frustration with what he sees as performative generosity and a preoccupation with public reputation. These feelings of mismatch culminate in Aron's self-described status as an outsider, even at events intended to reinforce collective bonds:

(54) **Aron**: I actually have never been to festivals and stuff. I do not have someone to go with. I do not really have Kurdish friends. I genuinely feel like a bit of an outcast when it comes to it. […] Kurdish people, if they see me, they would say hello, not 'rojbaş.' […] I do not think I have been to a single wedding ever since I have my eyebrow piercing, because I am like, 'Nah, I do not want to be stared at like an animal.' […] Sadly, they have not evolved in that sense. At least the Kurdish people I know.

Aron's narrative illustrates how participation in Kurdish communal life can feel conditional, shaped by implicit aesthetic and behavioural norms. He expresses difficulty in conforming to these expectations, particularly when these conflict with the westernised norms, values, and practices he has adopted in the host society. His sense of being an "outcast" is compounded by his perception of not being fully accepted within Kurdish cultural spheres. In his account, visible self-expression—symbolised by his eyebrow piercing in (54)—functions as a boundary marker, prompting scrutiny rather than acceptance. The detachment from his Kurdish identity is thus not an outright rejection, but a negotiated response to what he perceives as the rigidity of communal expectations and the social pressures he associates with it.

Aron emphasises that his shift away from Kurdishness is not solely the result of personal cultural discomfort or greater integration into British society, but is also shaped by broader structural forces—particularly education (Abobeker 2016; Gellner 1964). He recalls how school environments fostered identification with Britishness before he had the language or awareness to define Kurdishness for himself:

(55) **Aron**: I think I understood my British culture before I understood my Kurdish culture. And it was through, like, school and, like, um, friends over there. Like, yes it is diverse, but at school, we all spoke English because, like, yeah, we were all still, you know, a part of this culture as well. I think it is very easy to identify with [Britishness] because you are all, like, you are all in it together.

In (55), the "togetherness" of school life positioned Britishness as the shared and accessible norm—contrasting with the perceived difficulty of introducing Kurdishness into British public spaces.

Rêzan similarly frames his schooling years as a time when Britishness became dominant by default:

(56) **Rêzan**: When I was a teenager, I just was more interested in the other things that teenagers are interested in. Back then, the culture at school, it was more of a monoculture. […] So as a teenager growing up, I only knew Britain. I had to contend with being the first generation here, having to learn everything for myself. You know, the other kids in the school, their parents tell them everything about how to get through the social system and how to get on, how to succeed, economically, socially, and everything else, right? But when you are the first generation, you have to figure all that out yourself… And it is a bigger priority, or it was to me.

For him, school highlighted the gap between himself and peers who received step-by-step guidance from their parents on how to get through the unwritten rules of British society. As a second-generation immigrant, he had to navigate the system independently. Aligning with Britishness became a deliberate strategy—both to fit in with classmates and to gain the skills and knowledge he saw as necessary for social and economic success (Giles et al. 1979).

In both cases, education did not explicitly push them to reject Kurdishness, but to embed Britishness into the everyday, whether through the collective safety of shared routines or by becoming the cultural framework for fitting in and succeeding.

Now a teacher herself, Berfîn reflects on this process from the other side of the classroom. She actively incorporates ethnic cultures into school life through events such as International Day, yet recognises the more subtle ways in which British schooling still promotes cultural conformity:

(57) **Berfîn**: The younger generation that I work with now, whenever I ask them where are you from, they say, 'My parents are from India, but I am from here.' […] I think there is a sense of assimilation here as well. And we have to teach children British values, which is very weird for me as an educator—look, you have to kind of assimilate them. Education has to assimilate them into British identity. And even though it is not done in the way Turkish or Arab assimilation is, there is still that.

For Berfîn, education represents a softer, institutionalised form of assimilation—embedded within curricula and sustained by the framing of "British values" as the normative baseline. While schools may outwardly celebrate diversity, they nonetheless position Britishness as the default cultural reference point. This dynamic echoes Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism, whereby everyday practices subtly reproduce national belonging, and resonates with what Rêzan describes as a

“monoculture” in (56). In this way, the school environment can promote assimilation rather than integration, making Britishness the default mode of participation (Gellner 1964). Thus, even in London’s multicultural context, schools remain powerful sites for the normalisation of Britishness as the primary identity (Romaine 2000: 76).

Ultimately, this section has shown that identity for second-generation Kurds in London is not a fixed inheritance but a process continually renegotiated in everyday life. Whether expressed through political engagement, selective community ties, feelings of cultural dissonance, or the creative redefinition of belonging, participants move between Kurdish and British worlds in ways shaped by both opportunity and constraint. London is not merely the backdrop to these negotiations; it is an active force that enables, complicates, and at times disrupts how Kurdishness and Britishness are lived. Its dense Kurdish networks offer immersion, heritage transmission, and political engagement, while its multicultural fabric provides recognition and solidarity among other racialised groups—echoing Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that cross-group friendships can foster mutual affirmation (see Agît, Larya, and Araz; Pettigrew & Tropp 2011). Yet the same diversity can also fragment community life, leaving some—like Ravîn and Aron—feeling disconnected from the heritage community itself, a reversal of the host-society alienation described by Vertovec (1997).

Within this shared urban context, trajectories diverge sharply. Some participants filter London’s opportunities through narratives of displacement and gratitude inherited from their parents, resulting in selective engagement and a guarded sense of belonging (e.g., Aryan, Zîlan). Others use the city as a stage for reimagining and openly performing Kurdishness (e.g., Agît, Zara), while a smaller group employs the freedoms of multicultural life to distance themselves from Kurdishness altogether (e.g., Ravîn, Aron). London’s diversity thus offers both the space to express Kurdishness and the space to set it aside—making belonging a fluid, relational, and sometimes contested process, shaped by the interplay of personal agency, community norms, and structural conditions.

Belonging extends beyond formal group membership (Yuval-Davis 2006). It is shaped not only through self-identification but also in relation to the “other,” i.e. “where one does not or cannot belong” (Moftizadeh, Zagefka & Barn 2021: 1088). For Berfîn, visible difference reinforces her Kurdishness through how she is perceived, while for Aron, the absence of visible markers enables him to “pass” and withdraw from Kurdish life. These cases illustrate that self-ascription is only one dimension of identity (Barth 1969); being identified by others can be equally formative.

Across participants' experiences, one recurring way in which these processes unfold is through language use. It is through speech—what is said, to whom, and in which language—that identity may be explicitly claimed, subtly negotiated, or left unspoken. The following section examines how second-generation Kurds in London articulate and make sense of their identities through language use.

5.3. Speaking identity: Language as self

As discussed in Section 3.2, language can serve as a powerful marker of identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). For Kurds, this symbolic role is intensified by a history of stigma and attempted linguicide, in which Kurmancî has been positioned not merely as a means of communication, but as a marker of cultural survival and political resistance (cf. Section 2.1.1; see also Archanjo & Arpacik 2016: 23). While such pressures are absent in the London context—where Kurmancî can be spoken without legal restriction—it remains a minority language, situated within a society where English holds both local and global prestige. In the UK, English functions not only as the majority language but also as the default medium for education, public life, and most forms of socio-economic participation. Against this backdrop, the historical meanings assigned to Kurmancî—its associations with resilience, heritage, and resistance—intersect with the everyday realities of life in an English-dominant environment.

This section examines how second-generation Kurds in London interpret and navigate these dual positions: a heritage language tied to memory, identity, and symbolic value on the one hand, and a majority language associated with fluency, opportunity, and wider belonging on the other. Participants' relationships to Kurmancî vary widely. For some, it functions as a deeply emotional "language of the heart" (Caldwell-Harris 2015), central to self-understanding and cultural continuity. For others, it is used more pragmatically, restricted to certain domains and lacking strong affective resonance. By contrast, English is often linked to confidence, mobility, and access to broader social networks. These orientations are shaped not only by individual stories but also by the sociolinguistic ecology of migration, the configuration of community networks, and prevailing language ideologies (Masullo, Casado & Leivada 2024).

Section 5.3.1 considers the emotional positioning of each language—whether as a medium of intimacy, resistance, habit, or utility. Section 5.3.2 maps domains of use across home, school, and social life, exploring how these patterns influence confidence and proficiency. Section 5.3.3 then examines contact phenomena in participants' Kurmancî, including lexical borrowings, code-switching, and structural influence from English. Together, these analyses illustrate how language

operates as a lived enactment of identity for second-generation Kurds, shaping belonging, visibility, and self-definition in a predominantly English-speaking society.

5.3.1. Between emotion and habit: Kurmancî-English language attitudes

The ways participants relate to Kurmancî and English are shaped by the meanings each language holds in their personal and collective narratives. These orientations—emotional, habitual, or pragmatic—are central to how second-generation Kurds position themselves within overlapping Kurdish and British spheres, and how they navigate the symbolic tension between a minority heritage language and the majority language of the host society.

Early language experiences often take root in the family home, where parental speech, sibling interaction, and intergenerational exchange establish the foundations of linguistic identity (Sengul 2016: 167). Among the participants, these intimate environments provided the first exposure to both Kurmancî and English, yet the meanings attached to each diverges sharply. For many, Kurmancî is inseparable from family intimacy and its role as a heritage language—acquired informally, and valued as much for its symbolic and emotional weight as for its communicative function—is strongly reflected in participants' narratives (Polinsky & Kagan 2007).

Sîpan, for instance, situates his connection to Kurmancî in the earliest stages of socialisation:

> (58) **Sîpan:** Kurmancî is, what you learn to say—mom and dad for example—you learn to see your friends and your family. I mean, that is when you see them for the first time and everyone is speaking Kurmancî, so it has a psychological impact for life.

The "psychological impact" Sîpan describes in (58) is echoed by many participants, for whom speaking Kurmancî is inseparable from the emotional world of their earliest years. In his account, the language is not simply a tool for communication but a direct link to the people and environments that first shaped his sense of self (House 2003). Hearing and speaking Kurmancî recalls the warmth of family interactions and the shared understandings that formed before Britishness entered the picture. In this way, early language exposure does more than transmit vocabulary; it embeds affective associations that can endure across time and space.

Aryan makes this link between language and identity explicit, describing Kurmancî not just as a family language but as a safeguard for cultural continuity:

(59) **Aryan**: When I am surrounded by Kurds, I feel like traditions and values are kept and everyone around you speaks Kurmancî, so you never lose yourself. And your language, and your culture.

As Aryan's account in (59) suggests, language functions not merely as a symbolic marker of Kurdishness but as an active anchor that holds cultural identity in place. For him, being "surrounded by Kurds" and hearing Kurmancî spoken is inseparable from the preservation of shared traditions, values, and ways of relating. The act of speaking the language within a communal space is not just conversational—it is a reaffirmation of belonging and a defence against the gradual assimilation pressures of an English-dominant environment. In Aryan's view, to maintain the language is to safeguard the self; to lose it would be to erode the cultural and moral framework that defines Kurdishness for him. This conviction frames language as a living repository of identity that actively sustains it. The sense of "not losing yourself" that Aryan describes is also central to Zara's experience, though she frames it in terms of authenticity. For her, the connection between language and identity operates at the level of self-perception:

(60) **Zara**: Being able to speak your language helps you think in your original setting, you know, it makes you realise that you have a different personality when you are speaking Kurmancî and that might be a more natural personality. Whereas if I only spoke English, I do not think I would have ever fully felt as Kurdish.

Zara's notion of a "different personality" underscores the idea that each language can grant access to a distinct "self" (Grosjean 2014). In her account, English is tied to the institutional and public spheres of life in London, while Kurmancî evokes what she calls her "original setting"—a way of thinking and being rooted in inherited cultural frames. Shifting between these languages is therefore not simply a matter of switching codes; it entails a shift in identity, revealing a self that feels more natural and more Kurdish.

Araz extends this idea by making the link between language and selfhood explicit:

(62) **Araz**: To me, language is like an identity. When you speak in Kurmancî, or in any other language, even just for a moment… it is like your identity, your personality, changes. If you know three languages, each one carries its own identity I would say.

In (62), Araz treats each language as a vessel for a different identity, each with its own personality and emotional stance. This view aligns with research showing that bilingual speakers often experience shifts in identity across linguistic contexts, reflecting the cultural meanings and affective associations that each code carries (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). For Araz, Kurmancî is therefore not totally interchangeable with English; it unlocks a particular mode of being, one that cannot be replicated in another language.

Larya takes this discussion into the realm of expression and perception, highlighting how language choice shapes not only what is said but how it is experienced by others:

> (63) **Larya**: Sometimes you cannot express yourself like 100% in one language… if I am speaking English, I really want my friends to speak Kurmancî because I want to be able to explain something in the way that you explain it in Kurmancî—it is different, you know? […] It changes you. I have friends that when they hear me speak in Kurdish, they are like I did not even recognise your voice. Your whole voice changes.

Like Zara and Araz, Larya perceives a shift in self when moving between languages, but she locates this change in expression and emotional tone. Kurmancî allows her to convey meaning with greater nuance and emotional precision, while also altering her perceived presence—her "whole voice" changes, signalling a transformation that listeners can hear.

Zîlan's account introduces yet another dimension: the way language mediates access to cultural knowledge.

> (61) **Zîlan**: I learned a lot more about my heritage when I read about it in Kurmancî. If I learned about it in English, it is not the same. It is not the same connection. Sometimes it is mistranslated or things like that. I get the wrong news from English media. So Kurmancî, it helps more.

For Zîlan, Kurmancî is a language of direct access, providing heritage knowledge unfiltered by translation or what she perceives as distortion in English-language media. The difference is not only a matter of semantic precision but of authenticity and emotional immediacy. Engaging with heritage materials in Kurmancî feels closer to the cultural source, strengthening both her knowledge and her emotional connection to it.

Across participants' accounts, Kurmancî is consistently linked to emotional authenticity, familial intimacy, and moments of release, while English is positioned in the more public, professional, and pragmatic sphere. Sîpan articulates this contrast in terms of his "inner dialogue:"

> (64) **Sîpan**: For me, the inner dialogue was Kurmancî always when I was younger. When I learnt English then the inner dialogue became also English… I think in English, I speak in English, I read in English, I research in English. […] One of the most funny things is when I am tired, I speak in Kurmancî… Kurmancî feels like a shelter and an escape from the language that you have to study in or have to talk in and make friends in.

In Sîpan's case, the dominance of English in education, social life, and public interaction has gradually displaced Kurmancî from his primary internal monologue, reflecting broader patterns in which majority languages encroach on heritage language use in diaspora settings (Tosi 1984; Appel & Muysken 2005). Yet despite this shift, Kurmancî retains a symbolic and emotional primacy as his "shelter," i.e. an unpressured linguistic space contrasted with the demands of English-dominant environments about being correct, performing for others, or fitting in.

For Araz, this authenticity surfaces most vividly in moments of humour:

> (65) **Araz**: When I am in a funny mood… I will say it in Kurmancî. It feels more like authentic when I am having a joke. I just feel like it is more me, more authentic, it is funnier.

In (65), humour is not merely a communicative act but a form of identity performance. The humour "feels more [Araz]" when expressed in Kurmancî, suggesting that affective alignment between language and speaker can shape not only content but also style, rhythm, and the social dynamics of interaction.

Kurmancî's integration into deeply personal domains is also evident in cases where its use is entirely involuntary. Berfîn, for example, reports that her dreams occur exclusively in the heritage language:

> (66) **Berfîn**: All my dreams are in Kurmancî.

Dream language is often interpreted as an indicator of deeply internalised repertoires, reflecting not deliberate selection but subconscious cognitive processes (Dollnick & Schredl 2024). The presence of Kurmancî in this domain implies that, for Berfîn, it is more than a learned skill—it is a core part of her cognitive and emotional architecture. The fact that Kurmancî surfaces in unregulated spaces underscores its enduring role as a medium of thought, memory, and selfhood, even within an English-speaking environment.

These examples illustrate how positive orientations toward Kurmancî often stem from early affective experiences in family and community contexts. However, for others, attachment to the language was not immediate but emerged later in life, often through conscious acts of (re)learning. In such cases, engaging with Kurmancî becomes more than a linguistic activity—it is an intentional act of reclaiming heritage, deepening cultural alignment, and reconfiguring personal identity. This process is not simply framed as gaining a communicative skill but as recovering a silenced part of the self. Two participants in particular describe how conscious efforts to (re)engage with the language brought about a stronger emotional and symbolic connection, suggesting that affective ties to a heritage language can be cultivated as well as inherited.

Eren's narrative offers a vivid example of this dynamic. Having grown up without speaking Kurmancî, he describes his current engagement with the language as both personally fulfilling and politically significant—an act of historical and intergenerational repair:

> (67) **Eren**: I did not speak Kurmancî before. Now I can speak to everyone, and it feels right. It feels part of who I am. To me, Kurmancî is like a place where you can unlock door after door, and it offers a space of engagement, community, and culture. Kurmancî to me is a path. As I go further along it, I learn new words, new expressions. And as I learn these things, I build relationships with other Kurds. It is a shared path — it brings us together. Learning Kurmancî has been a recognition of my identity. I mean, obviously my parents had their reasons, but the fact that they remained silent is what the oppressors were expecting by denying our language. Turkey and all the politics that forbid my parents to speak their language and that traumatised them was silently killing Kurdishness. Now, we are safe in London, no one forbids me from learning it here, so as the youth we should never stop giving voice to the silenced.

Eren's account positions heritage language learning as both a deeply personal and a collective act—an explicit refusal of historical erasure and an investment in cultural survival (Alinia 2004; Haig

2004). Having grown up without speaking Kurmancî, his journey begins from absence, yet is framed as a process of "unlock[ing] door after door." This metaphor conveys not only the incremental nature of language acquisition but also the way each new word, phrase, or expression grants access to previously closed realms of cultural knowledge, social connection, and self-understanding. In Eren's narrative, Kurmancî is not merely a skill to be acquired but a path—one that he walks alongside others, building "relationships with other Kurds" as part of a "shared path." His observation that "the fact that [his parents] remained silent is what the oppressors were expecting" reframes parental non-transmission as the product of systemic violence. From this perspective, learning Kurmancî in London is doubly significant: it takes place in a space where the language faces no legal restriction, and it becomes, in Eren's words, a way to "give voice to the silenced [identity]." In this way, Eren's narrative captures the political, emotional, and communal dimensions of heritage language (re)acquisition in diasporic context, transforming what could be a private learning process into a public act of cultural resistance (cf. "language revival," Fishman 1991).

Rêzan's path to re-engaging with Kurmancî is different from Eren's, yet it reflects a similar shift from distance to active reclamation. Unlike Eren, he spoke Kurmancî regularly with his parents during childhood, but this was framed more by routine obligation than emotional attachment. His early experiences were also coloured by apprehension: his parents' strong political activism and the risks associated with Kurdish identity meant that speaking the language outside the home carried an unspoken sense of danger. While not formally prohibited in London, Kurmancî was, for him, associated with caution. For years, Kurmancî remained in the background—part of his personal history but not an active component of his everyday identity. Recently, however, Rêzan has taken deliberate steps to (re)learn the language, framing the process as a way to "connect [to his] people, [his] roots, [his] heritage:"

> (68) **Rêzan**: Any time I sit down and dedicate myself to [learning Kurmancî], I get a feeling that I am connecting. That I am doing something to connect me to my people, my roots, my heritage. I really feel like I am doing something I value. […] More interesting is when things come casually. So if I be on reddit or something like that, someone will just post something, it will be quite basic like a meme or something in Kurmancî, and I can just understand it instantly, I get a real buzz out of that, right? I am like, cool. Now I can just understand this content in a way that I could not, two years ago. And I just feel like more connected. It has a role in connecting me.

Like Eren, Rêzan frames language not only as a communicative resource but as a symbolic bridge to community and self-identity. His account underscores the fluidity of language ideologies: what began as a language of duty and political risk has become a language of voluntary connection and personal value. This transformation reflects broader patterns noted in diaspora studies, where heritage languages—once suppressed or marginalised—can be reframed through new contexts as emotionally resonant and socially empowering (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). Encounters in the language ("a real buzz") are experienced as both a marker of connecting and a reaffirmation of belonging. In reclaiming Kurmancî, Rêzan is not only restoring his proficiency but also redefining its meaning in his life, moving from guardedness to a sense of pride and agency.

Another reason for Rêzan's earlier disengagement from Kurmancî was not solely the negative associations tied to Kurdish identity, but also the positive valuation of English (see Section 3.2; Appel & Muysken 2005; Arslan 2015: 86; Peucker 2008: 217; Abdullah & Hemed 2020: 167; Crystal 1997). While he is now actively working to (re)learn Kurmancî as part of a broader reconnection with his heritage, he recalls that for much of his life he placed greater value on English, seeing it as a globally prestigious "winning ticket" that reduced the perceived need to invest in other languages:

> (69) **Rêzan**: Being in the UK, you already feel like some people treat this as if you have already won, right? Because a lot of people want to learn English fluently across the world. Around the whole world, people have ambition to learn English and be a fluent English speaker. And I got given that gift by accident. So you kind of almost feel like you are already speaking the world's most important language or the global language. So you have already kind of won the language lottery. And it is really hard to motivate yourself to bother doing anything else […] The motivation to learn anything else is not that high.

In (69), English is positioned as both a privilege and a shortcut, i.e. it is "a gift," the "language lottery" that seems to guarantee global communicative and economic capital. For much of his life, this perception made other languages, including Kurmancî, appear less urgent or less "profitable." English functioned as a default identity language, not only because it anchored him culturally, but because it promised access, opportunity, and prestige in a globalised world.

For some, English's dominance—and Kurmancî's limited reach—remains a decisive factor in shaping language attitudes. Ravîn's perspective, for example, echoes Rêzan's earlier sense of

English as an unrivalled resource, but frames the issue less in terms of personal motivation and more in terms of structural realities. His preference for English is grounded in perceived status differences between the two languages, shaped by the visibility, infrastructure, and opportunities each offers in the British context:

> (70) **Ravîn**: I think there is not a lot of reasons for people to learn Kurdish. In the community near my area, there is I think Kurdish free classes. You might enjoy speaking Kurdish of course, but there has to be more there. I think when you learned a language like French, I tell that to my parents as well, the resort is out there, you can use French, you can go to France, or when you learn Spanish, you can go to Spain and actually talk to people in French and Spanish, you can trade, you can have a good time in there, but when you learn Kurdish, this is the hard reality, like… Where do you want to speak it? […] Outside of my house, how much can I do with it? I mean, how much can it help you in a job interview. Maybe I'm just pessimistic, I do not know.

Ravîn's reflection underscores how language attitudes are embedded in the broader sociolinguistic ecology in which minority languages circulate. His comparison with French and Spanish—languages with established geopolitical presence, global currency, and mobility benefits ("trade," "job interview")—highlights the limited instrumental value of Kurmancî in the UK. Despite having grown up with Kurmancî, his remarks suggest that emotional attachment alone may be insufficient to sustain active use when the language is socially peripheral, economically devalued, and largely confined to domestic or community spaces. In this framing, English's dominance is the outcome of structural inequalities in linguistic capital and opportunity. For Ravîn, this translates into a clear functional division: Kurmancî is largely restricted to conversations with elders, while English operates as the primary medium in all other areas of his daily life.

> (71) **Ravîn**: English is work, it is social relations, like everything, really. English is everything. I live in London obviously. I would say English definitely, like the main role, that is what I use it the most.

In (71), English is not just the most frequently used language—it is the unmarked code of everyday interaction, encompassing employment, education, social life, and public engagement (i.e. "everything"). This habitual centrality reinforces its position as the default, while Kurmancî

becomes functionally peripheral, tied to a narrower set of interlocutors and contexts. Ravîn connects this restricted use to his perception that speaking minority languages in public—even in multicultural London—can be socially disadvantageous:

> (72) **Ravîn**: I heard people speak their language in public, and I was like… "Hmm, maybe that is not very adapted." I like to think it helps me to fit in the society.

Avoiding Kurmancî in public reflects more than just pragmatic convenience—it may signal a negative attitude toward its visibility in urban spaces. The preference for English in public domains is framed as a way to "fit in" with the societal mainstream, suggesting that the symbolic capital of English outweighs the value of openly performing Kurdishness in these contexts. This positioning further reinforces the association of Kurmancî with private, family-bound spaces and English with social mobility, acceptance, and modern urban life.

A similar shift appears in Aron's account, where English has become his primary communicative medium, with Kurmancî increasingly sidelined:

> (73) **Aron**: I think the English language would be… I guess you could call it my main form of communication. Um.. I think I have learned a lot in the way of, like, being able to express myself through English. […] I am really, like, losing Kurmancî. I just find that so much more convenient to speak English nowadays. Because even, like, now my mom, she speaks in English sometimes, because it is more convenient for her. […] To be honest, I feel insecure when speaking Kurmancî.

For Aron, the preference for using English is reinforced by a deep sense of linguistic insecurity in Kurmancî. His limited proficiency in Kurmancî leaves him feeling exposed when speaking it, which makes English feel like the safer choice "to express [him]self. As he explains in Section 5.2.2, these feelings are tied not only to language ability but to broader questions of belonging—his appearance, habits, and hybrid identity sometimes marking him as an outsider in Kurdish spaces. In this way, emotional safety becomes a decisive factor in language preference. This dynamic reveals how language attitudes are also shaped by the social and affective conditions in which a language is used.

This section has shown the complex and often ambivalent positioning of Kurmancî and English in the linguistic lives of second-generation Kurds in London. It reaffirms that language

attitudes among participants are not fixed but shaped by a combination of emotional, political, and situational factors—including intergenerational trauma, the relative safety of the diaspora, and opportunities for re-engagement with heritage. These trajectories reveal a dynamic interplay between structural influences—such as the global prestige and visibility of English—and personal, affective ones, such as early familial bonds, identity validation, and experiences of belonging or exclusion. In this sense, both identity and language attitudes remain open to change over time.

For many, (re)speaking Kurmancî is a way of reclaiming a silenced part of the self and reconnecting with Kurdish identity—what House (2003) calls "language as identification." In these cases, Kurdishness and language loyalty reinforce one another (Appel & Muysken 2005; Jamallullail & Nordic 2019). This positive orientation can be either inherited from early immersion or consciously cultivated later in life, with (re)learning Kurmancî functioning as an act of heritage reclamation and intergenerational repair. Here, English typically coexists with Kurmancî as the language of the public sphere.

Others, often those who identify more closely with Britishness, display more negative attitudes toward maintaining Kurmancî—whether because they feel that they do not fully belong in Kurdish-speaking spaces or because of its comparatively low prestige as a minoritised language (Irvine & Gal 2000; Piller 2015). In London, this perception is sharpened by English's national status and its status as a global lingua franca (Etchichi 2019), which can make Kurmancî seem limited in reach and utility. For these participants, Kurmancî is often reduced to a functional means of communication with older relatives, rather than a core marker of identity (House 2003).

The next section turns to language use (cf. complementarity principle, Grosjean & Li 2013), examining how participants navigate and allocate their languages across everyday contexts, and how these patterns, in turn, sustain or reshape their linguistic and cultural affiliations.

5.3.2. Where language lives: Language use and maintenance

While the previous section examined participants' language attitudes toward Kurmancî and English, this section turns to the concrete contexts in which each language is used. The distribution of language use across home, education, work, social life, and digital spaces offers insight into how bilingual speakers navigate linguistic choice in everyday life. However, these boundaries are not fixed: some consciously carve out space for Kurmancî in social or digital settings, while others experience a gradual contraction of its use. These patterns not only reflect, but also reinforce, the language ideologies discussed in Section 5.3.1.

As discussed in Section 5.3.1, Aron and Ravîn—who expressed more positive attitudes toward English and less commitment to maintaining Kurmancî—tend to situate Kurdishness, and by extension Kurmancî, primarily within the home and family sphere. In these cases, Kurmancî serves a largely functional role, used chiefly to communicate with relatives who do not speak English. Its use is limited to a narrow range of family interactions, motivated more by communicative necessity than by symbolic or emotional attachment.

Aron illustrates this pattern clearly:

(74) **Aron**: Kurmancî… Um… It is family. Like, it has helped me. For example, my grandma did not speak any English. So the only way I would speak to her was Kurmancî. And then at home, my dad was only having us speak Kurdish in the house. So, it did help in that regard of keeping connected with them, but not anymore.

While Kurmancî was once spoken consistently in his household—particularly with his grandmother and father—he notes a decline in its use and English has become more common at home. As noted in Section 5.3.1, he now speaks Kurmancî almost exclusively with his mother, who herself increasingly switches to English. This shows that the presence of Kurmancî in his everyday life has narrowed over time: once the immediate need for it within the family setting diminished, so did his motivation to maintain it (Lieberson & McCabe 1982).

Similarly, Ravîn uses Kurmancî entirely for family communication. He continues to speak it with his parents and extended relatives, who do not know English, but the language is restricted to these familial interactions:

(75) **Ravîn**: At home, we speak Kurdish. My parents do not really know English, so... that is the only language I can communicate with them. When I call my uncles and aunties, they all speak Kurdish. So if I lose Kurdish, I will not be able to speak to my family.

While Kurmancî remains essential for maintaining communication with family members, Ravîn deliberately avoids using it beyond these settings. As discussed in (72), he consciously refrains from speaking Kurmancî in English-speaking public spaces, viewing it as “not very adapted” to wider British contexts—even in multicultural London. This self-imposed restriction reflects his broader negative attitude toward the public use of the heritage language, shaped by perceptions of social fit

and the desire to align with the linguistic norms of his surroundings. The relative status accorded to each language is reflected in how and where they are used.

For both Aron and Ravîn, English carries greater symbolic prestige and is used in a far wider range of situations, while Kurmancî is largely confined to private and often invisible spaces. In Cummins' (1984) terms, these household uses are typically context-embedded and cognitively undemanding, offering limited opportunities to develop more advanced competence in the heritage language. By contrast, English dominates in all other spheres of daily life. The impact of this language shift on Kurmancî proficiency will be examined in Section 5.3.3 (cf. "language grid," Grosjean & Li 2013).

All participants—even those most attached to Kurmancî—acknowledge English as the default language in public, institutional, and professional contexts. It dominates education, the workplace, and interactions with non-Kurdish peers, functioning as both a lingua franca and a practical necessity in multicultural London. In some cases, English is not only the language of necessity but is deliberately chosen over Kurmancî for topics participants perceive as more comfortably or openly addressed in a Western cultural frame.

For Larya, this is particularly evident in discussions of mental health:

(76) **Larya**: I feel like us Kurds are really bad at expressing ourselves sometimes. Basically, things like mental health, and expressing yourself is not always easy. Kurds do not believe in mental health [laughs]. So it is easier in English sometimes.

Larya's comment in (76) highlights a form of pragmatic choice (Tare & Gelman 2010), where bilingual speakers draw on the language that best fits the communicative norms of the topic and audience. In this case, English provides a discursive space less constrained by what she perceives as Kurdish cultural taboos, allowing her to address sensitive issues without the same risk of social discomfort or misunderstanding (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). In this way, English and Kurmancî are strategically allocated to domains of talk where each offers specific expressive or cultural affordances.

The dominance of English does not entirely shift Kurmancî from daily life (Lieberson & McCabe 1982). In contrast to those whose use of the language is confined to family interactions, some participants integrate it into a wider range of settings, namely extending its presence into digital spaces, cultural consumption, and literacy practices (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977). Several report listening to Kurdish music, watching films or television series, and following news in

Kurmancî. Others also read books and write in Kurmancî, whether on social media or in online forums—activities that reflect both linguistic competence and a conscious commitment to sustaining the language and its vitality (Gal 1979; Jamallullail & Nordic 2019). This is significant given its historical marginalisation and the limited availability of formal instruction in Kurdish literacy (see Section 2). The ability to read, write, and produce content in Kurmancî—even informally—functions as both resistance to erasure and a reimagining of what Kurdish literacy can mean in diaspora.

Despite the hegemony of English in London, many participants prefer Kurmancî whenever circumstances allow. As Sîpan notes:

> (77) **Sîpan**: Wherever I go, if I need Kurdish food, if I need a haircut… if I can talk to anyone who knows Kurmancî, I will use Kurmancî.

Such deliberate language choices indicate that, for some, Kurmancî functions not only as a familial language but as a public and cultural resource, actively sustained through everyday interactions. In London, the visibility and density of Kurdish communities provide both the social networks and the cultural infrastructure that make such use possible.

While English is often framed as the connective language across ethnic and linguistic boundaries in diaspora (Clyne & Sharifian 2008)—and as a tool for integration, especially in multicultural urban settings like London—some participants attribute a similar connective power to Kurmancî. Zara, for instance, sees it as a bridge to other minoritised language communities:

> (78) **Zara**: [Kurmancî] is like a little weapon. It also even helps to make friends with other people because growing up, I could be friends with all different types of people because we all had like similar words in our languages, even though they are different. Like even with Albanian, we have the same Kurmancî words. Why? I do not know. But it makes things just like a network, you get to speak to different people.

In (78), Kurmancî is not only a marker of heritage but also a "network" language—linking generations and fostering solidarity across ethnic boundaries. Her observation suggests that linguistic overlap and cultural resonance between minoritised languages (such as Kurmancî and Albanian) can create alternative networks of belonging, contrasting with the more instrumentalist view of English as primarily a vehicle for mobility and integration (Blommaert 2010).

The broader social function of Kurmancî is also evident when it is consciously integrated into participants' professional or voluntary work. Aryan, for instance, uses the language in translation work and community-based teaching:

> (79) **Aryan**: I work sometimes part-time as a translator […] when there is no teacher in our community centre I give some Kurmancî lessons to the children.

Aryan's account reframes Kurmancî from a private inheritance into a public resource. Through translation work and teaching at a community centre, he positions the language as both a skill and a form of service to others. Such cultural initiatives contribute to reinforcing the ethnolinguistic vitality of Kurmancî (Gal 1979; Jamallullail & Nordin 2019), ensuring that it remains visible and functional in diaspora (see also Section 2.2 for the first generation's initiative on teaching Kurmancî). Indeed, for participants like Eren—who first learned Kurmancî in a similar community-centre setting—such spaces can provide a crucial entry point for heritage reclamation. These examples show that for some second-generation Kurds, Kurmancî is not simply maintained for personal or familial purposes, but actively mobilised as a means of community engagement, cultural transmission, and even professional development. This marks a shift from treating Kurdish as a nostalgic, private inheritance to recognising it as a usable, shareable, and sometimes marketable resource, despite the structural constraints of its minority status in the UK.

Some participants, like Berfîn, imagine a trajectory in which Kurmancî takes on functions typically fulfilled by English—knowledge production and intellectual expression:

> (80) **Berfîn**: I learnt to listen and speak as a child, and later I was able to read and write. I went to Kurmancî classes in the community because […] if I look at my professional life, I want to eventually be able to produce things in Kurmancî, like academic papers, research […] I am actively trying to speak Kurmancî to get a better level.

Her ambition to "produce things in Kurmancî" positions the language within what Cummins (1984) describes as context-reduced, cognitively demanding domains—settings that require advanced vocabulary, abstract reasoning, and sustained conceptual engagement. By moving Kurdish into these spheres, she not only might raise its prestige but also embeds it in future-oriented practices that enhance its long-term vitality. This reflects a broader tendency among some participants to

elevate Kurmancî from a familial code to a language of knowledge and cultural resistance (Hornberger 2003).

Others even express a similar curiosity that extends beyond Kurmancî itself, engaging with other dialects such as Soranî and exploring the history and etymology of Kurdish varieties as a way of reclaiming cultural knowledge:

> (81) **Zara**: There are good films that are made in Kurmancî. I watched every Kurdish movie and things like that. I watch it even in Soranî. […] It would be my dream to know every dialect of Kurdish.

Zara's aspiration to learn all Kurdish varieties reflects a plural, inclusive vision of Kurdishness (see also (41) in Section 5.2.2 on cultural interconnectedness). Her approach mirrors that of other participants who attend community language classes, practise Kurdish literacy, and consciously expand their repertoire beyond the variety spoken at home.

Note that most participants distinguish clearly between dialects such as Kurmancî and Soranî. One exception is Ravîn, who systematically refers to Kurmancî simply as Kurdish ("Kurdî"), perhaps reflecting a more generalised or instrumental understanding of the language rooted in its practical function as a means of family communication rather than as a differentiated linguistic identity.

By contrast, Zîlan exemplifies a highly politicised and historically informed approach. She actively researches Kurdish linguistic history, tracing lexical roots and cultural borrowings, and integrates this knowledge into her everyday speech:

> (82) **Zîlan**: I am not an expert in linguistics of course, but I try to learn about those things. I believe that the Kurdish dialects have really shaped a lot of the Middle East. For example, Iraq. In Arabic you do not have nouns that do not have meanings. But you have the capital of Iraq—Baghdad—which may be considered as a Kurdish city actually. Because Baghdad in Soranî means garden of justice, but in Arabic it means nothing. Baghdad—the capital of Iraq—is where the court was.

For Zîlan, historical and etymological awareness further underpins a deliberate stance of language purity (Hasanpoor 1999). She explains that she consciously avoids loanwords from Arabic or Turkish and, even in English, resists code-switching. This purist orientation—shared by others such

as Zara, Berfîn, and Aryan—positions lexical choice as a form of cultural and political agency. In their view, limiting external borrowings is not merely a matter of linguistic preference, but an act of resistance against assimilation and the ongoing marginalisation of Kurmancî. In this view, everyday speech becomes a site of historical continuity and political resistance, sustaining the language's presence even in the face of English's pervasive influence.

All participants recognise English as essential for life in London, particularly in work, education, and public interaction. Where they predominantly differ is in their approach to Kurmancî—ranging from minimal, home-based use to active efforts to expand its role. Some default to English even when Kurmancî could be used, reflecting a more passive inheritance of Kurdishness and a limited, largely domestic role for the heritage language. In contrast, others actively create opportunities to use Kurmancî beyond the home, extending it into cultural, professional, and academic spheres. For these latter speakers, Kurmancî takes on a deliberate and aspirational dimension: they learn to read and write it, explore dialectal variation, and envision futures rooted in the language. Some also engage in conscious efforts toward linguistic purification, avoiding loanwords and aligning their practices with a politicised vision of language maintenance. Such proactive engagement contrasts with the potentially surface-level competence of those whose use remains confined to familial exchanges—differences that have direct implications for proficiency development and for the influence of English on Kurmancî speech (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa 1976; Cummins 1984). These distinctions are explored further in Section 5.3.3, drawing on bilingual competence and language contact phenomena (cf. "language mode," Grosjean & Li 2013).

5.3.3. Traces of bilingualism: Language purism, loss, and hybridity

The previous sections examined participants' attitudes toward English and Kurmancî, as well as their patterns of use, which ranged from restricted, home-based maintenance to deliberate expansion into public, cultural, and academic spheres. Following Grosjean and Li's (2013) language grid model, such patterns have direct implications for bilingual competence. In bilingual contexts, proficiency in each language is closely tied to the breadth and depth of its use: when a language is limited to familiar, everyday exchanges, it often develops only surface fluency, whereas sustained engagement across a wider range of contexts can foster advanced skills, including literacy and specialised vocabulary (Fishman 1991; Cummins 1984). Moreover, the dominance of English in participants' lives may increase the likelihood of language contact phenomena, as English remains

highly activated even during Kurmancî use (cf. Grosjean & Li's concept of "language mode," see also Meisel 1981).[3]

Building on these findings, this section turns to the ways in which bilingualism leaves visible and audible traces on the language itself, whether consciously or unconsciously registered. The aim is to examine how Kurmancî and (British) English bilingual speakers in London negotiate their identity through language use, and whether their bilingual competence is linked to their language attitudes and identity.

One of the most salient areas where bilingualism manifests in participants' Kurmancî speech is phonology, with the pronunciation of personal names providing a striking example. Even names —arguably among the most intimate markers of identity—can bear audible traces of adaptation to the dominant language's phonology. Most participants, when introducing themselves in Kurmancî, used a recognisably Kurmancî pronunciation. Two exceptions were Aron and Ravîn, who, even while speaking in Kurmancî, pronounced their names in anglicised forms: /ˈæɹ.ɒn/ and /ˈræ.vɪn/ instead of the Kurmancî /ɑːˈɾon/ and /ɾaˈviːn/. Such adaptations illustrate how dominant-language phonology can seep into heritage-language use, subtly reshaping even the most personal linguistic items. The pronunciation of one's own name can become both a site of assimilation and a conscious boundary marker (Lippi Green 1994: 165). For bilingual speakers, choosing whether to retain a heritage pronunciation or adopt an English one is not merely a phonetic choice, but an act of identity negotiation—which might reflect the degree to which they align themselves with Britishness (Yilmaz 2018: 183).

While the pronunciation of names may represent a momentary shift toward English phonology, other phonological transfers appear more static, becoming fossilised features of some participants' Kurmancî speech (Hilpert 2018). The sound systems of English and Kurmancî share broad similarities (Hamid & Salih 2022; Paulmony & Mawlood Hussein 2019; Sedeeq 2017; Ghafar, Popescu & Kurt 2023), but several consonants present in Kurmancî have no direct equivalents in English, making them particularly susceptible to change.

A notable example is the substitution of Kurmancî /q/—a voiceless uvular plosive produced at the back of the oral cavity—with the English-like /k/, a voiceless velar plosive articulated further forward (Paulmony & Mawlood Hussein 2019):

[3] Given the internal variation of Kurmancî across regions and speaker backgrounds, particular attention has been paid to distinguishing between dialectal differences and contact-induced features. Instances attributable to regional or dialectal variation are not treated as evidence of simplification or transfer from English.

(83) **Aron**: Mamosta min li dibistanê pir **qenc** bû.
My teacher at school was really **kind.**

In (83), *qenc* ‘kind’ would normally feature the uvular /q/ (/qɛnd͡ʒ/), but Aron pronounces it with a velar /k/, anglicising the word’s phonetic profile.

Another sound affected is the voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ħ/ (Paulmony & Mawlood Hussein 2019; Roach 2000), which appears in Kurmancî words like *heye* (‘there is’). This sound is articulated with a much tighter constriction in the pharynx than the glottal /h/ of English words such as *hello*. In Kurmancî, especially before short vowels, /ħ/ can sound markedly “throatier”:

(84) **Ravîn**: Hevalê min ji hemû cîhan **hene**.
I **have** friends from all around the world.

In *hene* ‘there are’, the /ħ/ involves more throat tension and pharyngeal constriction (/ˈħɛ.nɛ/) (Paulmony & Mawlood Hussein 2019), whereas in English the /h/ is softer and produced further forward. For English-dominant bilinguals, reproducing /ħ/ might require some effort, which might lead some speakers replace it with the English /h/ or weaken it entirely.

The absence of certain sounds in English can lead Aron and Ravîn to simplify them or substitute the nearest English equivalent. These changes may occur unconsciously, shaped by English articulatory habits, but they might be not socially marked: for some, retaining /q/ or /ħ/ is tied to authenticity and heritage pride, while for others, using /k/ or /h/ signals pragmatic adaptation to the dominant linguistic environment.

Eren also displays some phonological challenges, likely linked to the fact that he acquired Kurmancî later in life (“successive bilingualism,” Hilpert 2018). Unlike Aron and Ravîn—whose phonological adaptations seemed unconscious—Eren appears acutely aware of his pronunciation, occasionally stopping mid-sentence to self-correct:

(85) **Eren**: Em wen… hwen… na, bise. **Xwen**dinê li ser mezinbûna kurmancî pir girîng dibînin.
We consider stu… St… No, wait. We consider **stu**dying as very important for the growth of Kurmancî.

In (85), he struggles with the [xw] cluster in *xwendinê* /xwɛnˈdɪne/, producing it first as /w/ and then as /hw/, softening or losing the velar fricative /x/. This substitution shifts the sound closer to an English-like /h/, which lacks the same constricted, back-of-the-mouth quality (Thackston 2006).

A further difficulty emerges with his /r/ realisations. In words like *ser*, *kurmancî*, *pir*, and *girîng* in (85), Eren's /r/ is intelligible but lacks the phonetic rhythm and subtlety characteristic of native Kurmancî speech (Thackston 2006). In Eren's case, this takes the form of extended or emphatic trilling, which—although technically correct in terms of articulation—does not match the more economical native pattern. In Kurmancî, /r/ is typically realised as a single tap [ɾ] intervocalically or in unstressed positions, and as a trill [r] in other environments (Thackson 2006). This pattern contrasts with Ravîn and Aron, whose production of certain phonemes appears reduced under the influence of English. Although both are simultaneous bilinguals, some of their phonetic features seem to be unconsciously shaped by English articulatory habits—possibly reinforced by their stronger sense of British identification and weaker emotional attachment to Kurmancî. Eren, by contrast, frames Kurmancî as central to his identity and may consciously exert greater effort to sound native, sometimes producing an overly careful or exaggerated articulation. These different trajectories—unconscious accommodation to the dominant language versus deliberate alignment with the heritage norm—reflect distinct orientations toward linguistic authenticity.

What is only found in Eren's speech, which is likely a result of late learning, is a clear transfer of English stress and intonation patterns into Kurmancî (Dinmar 1981). Consider the following sentence:

(86) **Eren**: Fêhmkirîna dîrokê hêrsan e li gor fêrbûna zimanê Kurdî, ne Îngilîzî.
Understanding history is linked to learning the Kurdish language, not English.

In native Kurmancî, stress tends to fall towards the end of a word, especially in content words, and the language has a more syllable-timed rhythm (Thackston 2006). A native-like realisation of (86) would sound like (stressed syllables in capital letters): fêhmkiRÎna dîROkê hêrSAN e li gor fêrBÛna ziMAnê kurDÎ, ne îngiLÎzî. Eren, however, often places stress on the first syllable, as in (British) English, producing something closer to: FÊHMkirina dîROke HÊRsan e li gor fêrBÛna ziMAne KURdi, ne ÎNgilîzi. This shift alters the natural prosodic flow and intonation sometimes rises unexpectedly at the ends of statements (an "uptalk" pattern). Such features are common when a second language is learned with the prosody of a dominant first language, as knowledge becomes

more entrenched over time (Grosjean 2015; Hilpert 2018). In this case, the influence of English stress-timing and nuclear stress placement audibly marks Eren's Kurmancî as a successively acquired language.

Beyond phonology, bilingualism also manifests in the lexicon, where word choice offers further insight into how participants navigate their two languages. The focus shifts to whether speakers draw on borrowings from English, engage in code-switching, or favour heritage equivalents, and to what extent these borrowed items are phonologically and morphologically assimilated into Kurmancî. Lexical choice can be a subtle index of identity, reflecting conscious ideological stances as well as unconscious patterns of use.

As discussed in Section 5.3.2, participants such as Zîlan, Berfîn, Aryan and Zara display a strong orientation toward language purism, often favouring Kurmancî equivalents over English borrowings (Casegrande 1954; Hasanpoor 1999: 21). This orientation appears linked to their active involvement in Kurdish community networks, politicised understandings of language, and frequent use of Kurmancî in daily life, including in professional and educational contexts. The choice for native words seems deliberate, consider the following example:

(87) **Berfîn**: Tu dikarî li **unî**- zanîngehên cuda civakên bibînî.
You can find communities at different **uni**- universities.

In (87), Berfîn begins to use the English borrowed word 'university' but consciously self-repairs to the Kurmancî *zanîngeh*. Given that workplace and educational terminology is often borrowed from English in diaspora Kurdish contexts (Thackston 2006), her shift suggests deliberate lexical monitoring. As Hasanpoor (1999: 21) notes, Kurdish speakers—particularly those with strong nationalist orientations—often view the protection of the language from change as an act of resistance to historical linguistic intolerance. However, the conversational context—an interview explicitly focused on Kurdishness—may have heightened her attention to linguistic choices. It is therefore possible that in more casual, non-research settings, she might opt for the English form. This highlights the importance of considering situational factors when interpreting purist choices (Hilpert 2018).

This stands in contrast to speakers such as Sîpan, a PhD student, whose professional and academic life is conducted almost entirely in English. He explained that his research work, conferences, and most academic exchanges happen in English, making the use of English

terminology in this domain feel natural and unmarked. Consequently, he uses borrowed forms of *university* and *research* instead of their Kurmancî equivalents:

(88) **Sîpan**: Di dawiya tebaxa de, divê min **rîserça** xwe li **universitîyê** pêşkêş bikim û bizanim heye ku ez dikarim bidomînim an na.
At the end of August, I have to present my **research** at **university** and find out whether I can continue or not.

In Sîpan's case, there is no indication of lexical monitoring or purist substitution, as these borrowings align with his lived linguistic reality: English is the default language of his academic domain. Note that both 'research' and 'university' in (88) are phonologically and morphologically adapted into Kurmancî speech (*rîserça, universitîyê*), illustrating how English-origin terms can be fully integrated into the heritage language (cf. "Kurdification," Hasanpoor 1999). In *universitîyê*, the final *-ê* marks the oblique definite form in Kurmancî. Since Kurmancî nouns are gendered, case markers differ accordingly (Thackston 2006). In this example, *universitî* follow the gender assignment of its native Kurmancî equivalents, which is feminine. *Rîserça* appears in an "ezafe construction" (*rîserça xwe*, 'my research'), which is a grammatical construction used to connect a noun to a following possessive (Bedirxan 2016). When a noun appears in an ezafe construction, it takes an additional suffix depending on its gender. Thus, *rîserça xwe* mirrors the native Kurmancî equivalent *lêkolîna xwe* ('my research'), where *lêkolîn* and *rîserç* ('research') are regarded as feminine nouns. This shows that the English-origin noun is fully integrated into the morphosyntactic system of Kurmancî, behaving like any other noun with respect to gender, case, and ezafe marking (Bedirxan 2016).

This kind of adaptation is the dominant pattern among participants when English words are used. Ravîn, however, provides a notable exception: when borrowing from English, he typically retains the original English pronunciation and omits Kurmancî suffixes, making it more a switch than a borrowing. By contrast, other participants generally adapt both pronunciation and morphology. Compare (89) and (90):

(89) **Ravîn**: Li ser ***internet***, tenê îngilîzî bi kar tînim.
On the **internet**, I only use English.

(90) **Agît**: Tu niha gelek zêdetir li ser **înternetê** fêr dibî.
You learn so much more on the **internet** nowadays.

The contrast between Ravîn's and Agît's integration of *internet* illustrates two distinct patterns of language contact phenomena. Ravîn produces *internet* while retaining the donor language's phonetic structure and without morphological assimilation (cf. "zero transmorphemisation," Al-Omoush & Al-Faqara 2010: 29). Agît, in contrast, uses the adapted form *înternet*, with the high front vowel /î/, a trilled /r/, and the oblique suffix *-ê*. This phonological and morphological assimilation indicates deeper integration of the English term into Kurmancî's grammatical system (MacKenzie 1954; Haig & Matras 2002). Such micro-level contrasts might show how a single borrowed word can reflect varying degrees of ideological integration. While care must be taken not to overgeneralise, Ravîn's English-like pronunciation may align with his self-reported preference for English and potentially index a stronger orientation toward Britishness. Agît's Kurdification of the term, by contrast, may suggest a greater degree of comfort embedding borrowings within Kurdish morphosyntax.

In fact, Aron and Ravîn tend to simplify or generalise a range of morphological and syntactic features, even when using Kurmancî lexemes (Smolicz 1983), e.g.:

(91) **Ravîn**: Ew **mirov** diçin şer.
These ***man** go to war.

In (91), the plural morpheme is absent: *mirov* ('man') appears in the singular rather than the expected plural form *mirovan* (Abdullah & Hemed 2020), despite agreement being marked elsewhere (*ew* 'these' and *diçin* 'go' are plural). Similarly, the bare form *şer* ('war') is used instead of the expected *şerê* with the oblique suffix.

Features that have no direct equivalent in English also tend to be simplified in these two participants' speech. A clear example is the ergativity in the past tense found in Kurmancî (Bedirxan 2005). In Kurmancî, the subject of a transitive past-tense verb is marked in the oblique case, while the object is unmarked. Consider the following:

(92) **Aron**: **Ez** wî li wir cara dawî dît.
I saw him there last time.

Aron uses the nominative *Ez* ('I') in (92) rather than the oblique form *Min* to mark the ergative subject. The expected sentence would be ***Min** wî li wir cara dawî dît* ('**I** saw him there last time').

By using the nominative form as though Kurmancî followed the nominative–accusative alignment of English, Aron removes an important grammatical distinction, thereby simplifying the syntactic structure.

Another case of simplification appears with circumpositions (Bedirxan 2005). Kurmancî typically encodes spatial relations using two-part circumpositional structures, with one element preceding and the other following the noun phrase. This would be the case, for instance, when expressing 'in front of:'

(93) **Aron**: **Di** ber mala me *shop* heye.
There is a shop **in front of** our house.

The expected form, ***Di*** *ber mala me* ***de*** *shop heye*, includes the second circumpositional element *de*, completing the required *di ... de* frame. In Aron's version, omitting *de* reduces the structure to a single preposed element.

An area of generalisation is the placement of negation in certain compound verbs (Bedirxan 2005). While the typical present-tense negation pattern in Kurmancî is *na* + verb, compound verbs follow a different rule: the negator precedes the verb stem rather than any attached prefix. For example, with the verb *ve-kirin* ('to open'), negation should be placed before *kirin*, not before the separable prefix *ve-*, producing *venakim* ('I do not open').

(94) **Ravîn**: Ez *discussion* **navekim**.
I do not open a discussion [about it].

In (94), the base verb is *kirin*, with *ve-* functioning as a prefix meaning 'apart' or 'open.' Instead of the expected *venakim*, Ravîn inserts *na-* before the full prefixed verb (*navekim*), reflecting the general negation pattern.

The tendencies show that simplification and generalisation can affect not only morphology but also broader stylistic range. In some cases, the preference for economy extend into clause-level organisation, where speakers opt for syntactically simpler strategies. One such tendency is the use of direct speech rather than embedding the clause within a more complex structure (Thackston 2006):

(95) **Ravîn**: Ez gotim xwe ‘na, ez wilo nakim’
I told myself ‘no, I would not’

Ravîn’s systematic avoidance of more embedded or subordinated constructions reduces syntactic complexity and can contribute to monostylism observed in heritage language use (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter 1977). Limited exposure and domains of use may favour simpler and colloquial syntactic choices at the expense of more elaborated registers. In the interview, Ravîn himself comments that he finds it “exhausting” to have different ways of saying things in Kurmancî, a feature which other participants tended to frame as the “richness” of the language. This metalinguistic stance further illustrates how the maintenance of stylistic diversity in Kurmancî can be experienced as a burden when need is limited, reinforcing a preference for simplified patterns.

While the previously given examples cannot be explained solely as outcomes of English contact, they reflect a broader tendency toward simplification and generalisation that often accompanies restricted use of a heritage language (cf. “language loss,” Grosjean & Li 2013). In this sense, such patterns may arise less from transfer than from limited proficiency and reduced access to elaborated registers, processes that are common in bilingual settings regardless of the dominant language involved (Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky 2013).

While the above phenomena are more typical of heritage language reduction processes, other instances reveal a more overt imprint of English influence, where specific analytic structures from the dominant language are directly reproduced in Kurmancî. In Kurmancî, for instance, indefiniteness is often marked morphologically by adding the suffix *-ik* (*pirtûkik*, ‘a book’) (Bedirxan 2005). Consider the following:

(96) **Aron**: Min **yek pirtûk** xwend îro.
I read **a book** [about that] today.

In (96), Aron uses the numeral *yek* (‘one’) to mark indefiniteness, mirroring the English indefinite article *a*, rather than employing the morphological marker *-ik*. Its consistent use in place of native morphological marking suggests the influence of English analytic noun phrase structure.

Beyond the noun phrase, occasional traces of English transfer are also visible at the sentence level. Kurmancî normally follows a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) order, with the verb placed at the end of the clause (Bedirxan 2016). In contrast, English requires a Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order.

(97) **Aron**: Ez **diaxivim** ser kar, ser jiyan û mal jî.
I **talk** about [things like] work, and also life and home.

In (97), the verb *diaxivim* ('I talk') is placed directly after the subject *ez* ('I'), producing a Subject–Verb sequence before the objects. The expected SOV order would be something like *Ez ser kar, ser jiyan û mal jî* ***diaxivim***. This medial verb placement aligns more closely with English SVO word order, suggesting syntactic transfer. Although such shifts are not systematic, their presence indicates that English influence can reach the clause level, reshaping the word order of Kurmancî.

Another clear type of transfer involves loan translation (Meriläinen et al. 2016), where English expressions are mapped directly onto Kurmancî. One earlier example is (94), *Ez discussion navekim*, a direct rendering of the English idiom "to start a discussion," but not a conventional expression in Kurmancî. It might be argued that this rendering was already triggered by the switch to the English noun *discussion*, reflecting a lack of access to the appropriate Kurmancî equivalent (i.e. to fill a gap, Petryshyn 2014; Clyne 1972). This calque is, however, not an isolated case: similar word-for-word translations appear in (98) and (99).

(98) **Ravîn**: Erê, ew mana dikê.
Yes, it makes sense.

In (98), the expression reproduces the English idiom 'it makes sense,' but Kurmancî conventionally uses verbs such as *fêm kirin* ('to understand') rather than attributing 'sense' to an external subject. The structure thus reflects an English conceptualisation mapped directly into Kurdish words.

(99) **Aron**: Na ne wilo… Ez tenê dikarim noqta ya xwe bigihînim.
Not like that… I just can get my point across.

In (99), Aron reproduces the English idiom 'to get my point across' through a literal word-for-word translation: *noqta* ('point') combined with *bigihînim* ('get across'). While intelligible, this phrasing is non-idiomatic in Kurmancî, which would normally employ other strategies to express the idea of clarifying or making oneself understood, e.g. *Ez dixwazim gotina xwe vekim* ('I want to explain my point').

English influence also emerges in pragmatic conventions. For example, when thanked, most participants responded with the expected Kurdish idiom *ser çavan*, literally 'on (your) eyes,' a conventionalised reply conveying respect and willingness, comparable to 'you're welcome' in English. Aron and Ravîn, however, typically replied with *problem tene* ('no problem'), a more English-like way of responding. Notably, they even used *problem* rather than the native Kurmancî equivalent *pişgirêk*, underscoring how transfer can displace established pragmatic routines. This suggests that English influence is not confined to morphosyntax, but also reshapes pragmatic conventions in Kurdish interactions.

These examples suggest two overlapping but distinct processes at work. On the one hand, many of the observed patterns—such as the levelling of plural marking, the erosion of ergativity, the omission of circumpositional elements, and the over-generalisation of negation—reflect outcomes of language shift (Lieberson & McCabe 1982). Simplification here arises not directly from English, but from the reduced development of elaborated registers in Kurmancî, a tendency widely documented in heritage language contexts (Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky 2013). On the other hand, other patterns potentially reveal the imprint of English. Some involve structural transfer, such as the analytic marking of indefiniteness with *yek* ('one') in place of the suffix *-ik*, or occasional shifts toward SVO word order. Others extend further into idiomatic calquing, where English expressions are rendered word-for-word into Kurmancî, resulting in non-idiomatic forms. Even at the level of pragmatics, English might reshape convention. Taken together, these processes might point toward a form of subtractive bilingualism (Lambert 1981), in which English progressively reshapes heritage Kurmancî. They also suggest a stronger activation of English even in Kurmancî speech, consistent with the language mode hypothesis (Grosjean & Li 2013), whereby the dominant language remains cognitively active and exerts influence across grammar, lexis, idiom, and pragmatic convention. This imbalance is reinforced by the participants' own self-positioning in previous sections, namely their stronger identification with Britishness than with Kurdishness. The dominance of English in their everyday lives and identities is echoed in the dominance of English structures within their Kurmancî. Aron makes this particularly explicit in a metalinguistic reflection, where he describes his reliance on mental translation from English when speaking Kurmancî:

(100) **Aron**: Bi rastî… Ez nezanim. […] Ti zanî cîye, *brain*... gelekî girîng e. Wextê ku ez Kurdî diaxivim, ez *straight away* di nav *brain* xwe de tercûme dikim—*in my mind, subconsciously, without me realising*, ez tercûme dikim. *Brain* min xwe digerê.

> To be honest… I don't know. […] You know what, *brain*… It is something really important. When I speak Kurdish, I *straight away* translate in my *brain* —i*n my mind, subconsciously, without me realising,* I translate.
> My *brain* search itself.

Aron's comment encapsulates the dynamic outlined above: English remains the cognitively dominant system, with Kurmancî filtered through it "straight away… subconsciously, without [him] realising." This was also evident during the interview: whenever Aron did not understand a question in Kurmancî, he would switch to English and ask "Say that again?" His observation that "[his] brain searches itself" illustrates how heritage language use can be experienced as effortful, reliant on translation and retrieval rather than direct access. In this sense, the linguistic patterns documented in the data are not only descriptive of contact and shift but also mirrored in speakers' own lived awareness of how English mediates their Kurmancî.

Aron's language use in (100) also exemplifies another phenomenon visible in the data: code-switching. In his case, two types of switching occur. First, there is intra-sentential switching (Poplack 1980; Gumperz 1971), as with the insertion of the English noun *brain* ("di nav brain xwe") in (100), echoing earlier cases such as *shop* in (93) and *discussion* in (94). Alongside such insertions, the interviews also reveal inter-sentential switching, as in (100) where Aron shifts mid-utterance—"in my mind, subconsciously, without me realising, ez tercûme dikim" (Poplack 1980; Gumperz 1971).

While code-switching is a well-documented feature of bilingual speech (Crystal 1992; Thomason & Kaufman 1988), its motivations differ (Appel & Muysken 2005). For Aron and Ravîn, switching often appears to compensate for lexical or conceptual gaps, filling spaces where an equivalent in Kurmancî is either unavailable or less accessible (cf. the deficit hypothesis, Kachru 1994: 147; Ghafar & Mohamedamin 2023: 9). This aligns with their broader linguistic profile, marked by simplification and transfer, and reflects a speech mode in which English remains cognitively dominant.

The situation is somewhat different for Eren, a late learner of Kurmancî, who also switches when he lacks a word, but in a more learner-like mode:

(101) **Eren**: Kurmancî ji bo min, çawa bêjim… *What is the word for strength?*
Interviewer: Qewet?

Eren: Belê, qewêt. Kurmancî bi qewete, u qewet didê mero.

Eren: Kurmancî to me, how can I say this… *What is the word for strength?*
Interviewer: Strength?
Eren: Yes, strength. Kurmancî is powerful, and gives us strength.

In this case, when searching for an equivalent for 'strength,' he pauses and explicitly solicits help from the interviewer before re-incorporating the Kurmancî form into his utterance. Eren's switching is overt and self-reflexive, part of his learning process rather than an ingrained speech habit.

Other participants, particularly those with more puristic attitudes, display far less switching. One notable exception is Zara, who occasionally switches for emphasis rather than necessity. For example, in (102) she punctuates her Kurdish statement with the English "Obsessed with the past," giving rhetorical weight to her point through the shift in language:

(102) **Zara**: Em nikarin her gav li ser borîya bixwînin. Em bi bingehî şermendî li ser şer in. *Obsessed with the past*.

We cannot always think about the past. We are basically obsessed with wars. *Obsessed with the past*.

Switching functions as a stylistic resource, drawing attention to a key phrase rather than signalling lack of proficiency. It may also reflect her positioning of herself as a bilingual speaker, drawing on both linguistic repertoires. In the interview setting, the switch might carry an interactional function as well, since she knows that the interviewer also has access to English (Appel & Muysken 2005). This choice can further be read in light of her broader orientation toward solidarity across Kurdish subgroups and other minority communities, see (41). In this sense, the use of English may index inclusivity, reaching beyond the Kurmancî-speaking in-group to a wider diasporic or minority audience.

Finally, other participants such as Larya, Agît, and Sîpan use switching primarily for referential purposes (Appel & Muysken 2005), particularly when discussing topics tied to their studies or work, where English terminology is more readily available (Kymlicka & Straehle 1999:

70). A striking moment occurred after the formal interview.[4] While discussing his thesis in English, he was suddenly interrupted by a dog, prompting an immediate switch into Kurmancî, complete with the onomatopoeic *haw* ('woof'):

(103) **Sîpan**: Kî dibêjî 'haw,' ji min re bêje.
Who said 'woof,' tell me.

The shift in (103) illustrates a functional division between languages: English dominates the academic and professional domain, while Kurdish emerges spontaneously in contexts of emotion, and intimacy. The fact that this example occurs in playful "pet talk" underscores the symbolic value of Kurmancî as the language of affective immediacy, contrasting with the instrumental role of English (Lin 2022). This moment encapsulates the ambivalent positioning of many participants—where English frames the world of work and study, but Kurdish remains a locus of affect and identity.

Another common pattern of code-switching is tag-switching, where discourse markers or interjections from one language are inserted into the other (Poplack 1980). Among participants such as Araz and Larya, these appeared frequently in the form of pragmatic particles like *so*, *I mean*, *like*, or sentence-final *you know*. Such uses often serve an interactional function, managing discourse and stance (Appel & Muysken 2005), but they can also be read as subtle ways of indexing a hybrid bilingual identity (Poplack 1980).

A particularly striking case is Agît, whose self-identification as both a "Kurd Londoner" and part of "Gen Z" in (16) resonates with his linguistic practices. His speech includes not only English markers but also elements of contemporary British slang woven into Kurmancî, producing a style that both affirms his Kurdishness and locates him firmly within a London-based youth identity. This might not simply be a case of referential or interaction functions, but rather a stylistic choice that performs hybridity. The following excerpts illustrate this blending:

(104) **Agît**: Xelat dikarin hîs bikin ku ew hêsantir e, û tenê dibêjin ku ew ji Tirkiyê ne an jî ji Iraq an Îranê. Na*, fam*. Ew rastî ev e ka ew hûn digihin me.

[4] This anecdote is included with the participant's explicit permission, as it took place outside the formal interview setting.

People may think that it is easier and just say thatchy are from Turkey or from Iraq or Iran. No*, fam.* That is literally how they get to us.

The use of *fam*—a colloquial London English term for "close friend/family"—marks Agît's alignment with London youth vernacular. Importantly, this insertion does not serve a referential need but carries an in-group performative function, signalling belonging to both a Kurdish and London-based peer community.

(105) **Agît**: Ez dibêjim em [Londonî] pir, pir xelatkar in. Gelekî ji wan dikarin bi hindiktirê jî bigirin. Û erê, em tenê dilîşînin, *man*.
I would say we [Londoners] are very, very creative. A lot of Londoners can make do with quite little. And yeah, we just care, *man*.

In (105), the English discourse marker *man* appears at the end of the clause. Agît uses it rhetorically, to give rhythm and emphasis. This tag-switching is characteristic of youth speech in multicultural London English (MLE, Cheshire et al. 2013), underscoring his hybrid identity.

(107) **Agît**: Ew zanyar in bi temamî ka bi Kurdan re çi bû, *bruv*.
They know exactly what happened to the Kurds, *bruv*.

The use of *bruv*—a London slang equivalent of *brother*—reinforces intimacy and solidarity. Its placement here, in a serious political comment, softens the statement while still situating it in his peer group vernacular.

(106) **Agît**: Gelekî girîng e û zimanê Kurdî divê were parastin û hînkirin. Têbînîya ku dixwazim lê zêde bikim ew e ku her ku bêyî ew çi ye. Lê, erê, girîng e, *innit*?
It is so important and the Kurdish language should be preserved and taught. The asterisk I want to place is: wherever it is possible. But, yeah, it is important, *innit*?

The final tag *innit* is a quintessential MLE feature, functioning not for meaning but as a pragmatic marker of stance. Its integration into a Kurmancî sentence exemplifies how Agît maps London identity directly into Kurmancî discourse. The sentence as a whole combines a strong ideological stance (language preservation) with a youth vernacular style, reflecting both his Kurdish activism and his self-identification as a "Kurd Londoner."

In this sense, language use not only performs but can also affirms identity. Identity does not surface solely within specific speech forms, but also in the very act of language choice. A particularly illustrative case in this study is Rêzan, who elected to conduct his interview in English. Although he had acquired Kurmancî within the home, his exposure was largely confined to everyday familial domains, and he considered English to offer a greater expressive range for abstract or identity-related topics. At the same time, he emphasises his ongoing efforts to improve his Kurmancî as part of a broader attempt to reconnect with his heritage. Yet he also acknowledges that his Kurdishness continues to be filtered through "the lens of Britishness," remarking that he had been "brought up like a Westerner" and that this upbringing has left a lasting imprint, see (10). His preference for English in the interview can thus be read as more than a matter of linguistic ease: it exemplifies how identity is not only enacted within language, but also through the very choice of language itself.

The linguistic traces of bilingualism in second-generation Kurdish British individuals reveal a complex interplay between Kurmancî and English, reflecting their identity negotiation. Phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic influences from English, along with simplifications in Kurmancî, indicate a dominant British identity for some, driven by English's cognitive and social prevalence. Conversely, purist tendencies and deliberate efforts to maintain Kurmancî signal a stronger Kurdish identity tied to heritage pride. Hybrid practices, like Agît's use of London slang, showcase a blended "Kurd Londoner" identity. Bilingual competence varies with language use: limited Kurmancî exposure leads to simplification and English dominance, while active engagement fosters proficiency and cultural alignment, highlighting the dynamic role of language in identity formation.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how second-generation Kurds in London negotiate identity and language within the context of diaspora. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve young adults, the study asked how Kurdishness and Britishness are articulated in everyday life. The findings demonstrate that identity is "variable and contingent rather than fixed and given"

(Brubaker 2002: 168). Participants' accounts reveal that identity is continually reconstructed, shaped both by external factors—such as state rhetoric and diasporic conditions—and by everyday practices and interactions (Barth 1969; Renan 1990).

For second-generation Kurds in London, this negotiation cannot be understood apart from the broader historical context. Their self-positioning involves balancing a minoritised Kurdish identity—deeply shaped by histories of repression and state denial—with a more dominant national British identity. Language makes these asymmetries especially visible. On the one hand, Kurmancî is a heritage language marked by suppression and even "linguicide" (Haig 2004: 16). On the other, English represents not only the language of education and opportunity but also the global lingua franca. Within this duality, bilingualism emerges as both a resource and a challenge, mediating how Kurdishness and Britishness are lived and expressed.

Among the participants, some express a strong orientation toward Britishness, often showing assimilationist tendencies. For these individuals, Britishness is not abstract but embedded in daily life: it was learned through childhood, school, and peer interaction, and it actively shaped their self-perception. This can be read as an identity constructed through "macrohistorical forces" (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 851), in which broader social and economic structures guide the conditions of belonging (cf. Romaine 2000). Fitting into British society is, for them, a pragmatic priority. Kurdishness, by contrast, is primarily acknowledged in terms of lineage and family background. These participants do not identify as "English," recognising it as an ethnic category distinct from their own, but Kurdishness often appeared passive and external—something inherited rather than actively lived. This is reflected in both language and practice. They tend to use the third-person plural when referring to Kurds or their parents' homeland, distancing themselves from Kurdish collectivity. Similarly, they often avoid Kurdish community spaces, describing themselves as outsiders, which further reduces opportunities to speak Kurmancî. English is given clear dominance, valued for its convenience, mobility, and social utility. Their bilingualism reflects these orientations. Kurmancî is spoken only when necessary, often with insecurity about fluency. The participants' speech shows indeed cases of simplifications, morphosyntactic generalisations, and transfer from English, including loan translations. At times, lexical gaps are filled by switching to English altogether. The dominance of Britishness and English in their identity and speech seems to be prominent. Even self-presentation aligns with this orientation: some began their interview introducing themselves with English pronunciation of their names, and later ended by closing in conventionally English ways. Yet identity is not static even for these participants. For some, an initial detachment from Kurdishness—rooted in fears surrounding the Kurdish question— can

gradually give way to reconnection. Language often serves as the anchor of this return. Efforts to re-engage with Kurdish identity could be observed in conscious attempts to pronounce sounds more authentically, acquire new vocabulary, or align with native-like stress patterns. This illustrates how identity is continually reconstructed within the same individual, with language providing a key medium through which boundaries between Kurdishness and Britishness are renegotiated.

Another group of participants positions themselves almost exclusively within Kurdishness. While they do not deny Britishness, they frame it as external and formal—defined by documents, institutions, and legal status rather than lived belonging. In their narratives, Britishness is solely described in contrast to Kurdishness: as a national identity fixed to territory and statehood, something Kurds historically lack. Thus, although they hold British passports, they do not feel they truly belong; they have simply "ended up" in Britain. Gratitude is still expressed, but primarily for the opportunities London affords as a place where Kurdishness can be openly practised and even strengthened—whether through teaching the language, engaging in community activities, or transmitting cultural heritage in ways that would not have been possible in the homeland, where open expressions of Kurdish identity had long been suppressed. For these participants, history and politics are central to their self-identification. Kurdishness is deeply tied to collective experiences of marginalisation, oppression, and resistance. This could sometimes lead to separationist tendencies: participants describe themselves as interacting almost exclusively with other Kurds and feeling a fundamental alienation from British people, emphasising that they are visibly and culturally different. In this sense, they are actively engaged in constructing and policing symbolic "boundaries" between Kurds and others (Fearon & Laitin 2000). London, with its sizeable Kurdish communities, provided fertile ground for sustaining this orientation. Their language practices seem to reflect this stance. Many adopt purist attitudes, actively seeking to expand the functional domains of Kurmancî and to resist reliance on English borrowings. This effort to preserve and enrich Kurmancî can be seen as a strategy of identity maintenance, as "[t]o have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood" (Billig 1995: 8). In this group, identity is narrated as a continuation of the first-generation struggle, inherited yet recontextualised in a diasporic setting. Participants frequently speak in terms of "we" when recounting their parents' experiences, signalling a felt continuity between past and present struggles. Identifying as Kurdish seems to be described as a daily "fight" to resist assimilation in a multicultural setting. This active engagement —whether in community spaces, linguistic practices, or political expression—is also future-oriented: participants articulat a sense of moral and political responsibility to preserve Kurdishness for coming generations, and some express aspirations of eventual return to the homeland.

A third group of participants occupies what can be described as a "third space" (Bhabha 1994), where a new form of Kurdishness emerges—one that coexists with, and is shaped alongside, Britishness. Like the more Kurdish-oriented group, these participants generally grew up immersed in Kurdish traditions and values, and they retain a strong affective attachment to Kurdishness after childhood. Heritage remains central to their sense of self, influencing values, outlooks, and even the frameworks through which they interpreted the world. Many are also politically aware and express pride in Kurdish history and collective struggle, which they frame as a source of resilience and strength. Unlike the separationist stance, however, they do not view life in London as a threat to Kurdishness but rather as an opportunity. They see the multicultural setting as a space for expanding and reimagining Kurdish identity through contact with other minority and immigrant groups. In this perspective, Britishness is not merely tolerated or externalised; it is seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing with Kurdishness. Living in London enables them to situate Kurdishness within broader networks of belonging, solidarity, and exchange. This bicultural orientation is reflected in their bilingualism. Participants describe some expressions as easier or more natural in English, others in Kurmancî, depending on the context and subject of interaction. Code-switching and borrowing are not perceived as signs of deficiency but as integral to their repertoire, embodying the fluidity of their dual belonging. In this group, then, Kurdishness is not framed as opposed to Britishness, but as enriched by it—suggesting that diasporic life in London can generate hybrid, forward-looking forms of identity. Over time, such features may even become fossilised, giving rise to a distinctive diasporic ethnolect that symbolises this emergent "new Kurdishness" (cf. "the sedimented sand deposited on the bottorn of a lake," Weinreich 1953: 11).

It is still too early to draw firm conclusions about long-term patterns, studies focusing on later generations—such as the third generation—would provide valuable insight into how Kurdishness and Britishness are negotiated over time and across shifting contexts. Although the findings suggest directions for future research, the limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The small sample size and reliance on interviews mean that participants were inevitably conscious of the research situation and may have framed their identities in particular ways. Complementary methods such as participant observation could offer a more nuanced view of identity as it is enacted in everyday practice. Furthermore, while this study focused on Kurmancî, comparative research including other Kurdish dialects—or speakers who are trilingual with Turkish or Arabic—would highlight the diversity of linguistic repertoires within the diaspora. It would also be valuable to consider individuals who do not speak Kurdish at all, and how they negotiate identity in the absence of the heritage language. Finally, the London context must be taken into account: as a

highly diverse city, it provides particular conditions for multicultural coexistence. Future research could examine less diverse urban or regional contexts, where pressures of assimilation and experiences of racism may be more acute, particularly in light of the rise of right-wing politics.

Despite these limitations, this research underscores the importance of listening to the voices of the second generation. Their accounts show that identity is never singular or complete: it is continually negotiated and takes different forms across contexts. Bilingualism seems to play a central role in this process, not only reflecting identity alignments but also actively enabling the reconfiguration of Kurdishness and Britishness in diaspora. Language practices bring identity into speech, making visible the complexities of heritage, belonging, and diasporic life. To close, I return to the riddle posed at the beginning of this thesis: *Tişteki min heye, her derê derbas dibe, ew çi ye?* ('I have something that goes through everything, what is it?'). I asked this at the end of each interview, and all participants were aware of its meaning: "What makes a Kurdish person Kurdish?," or any other identity such as "What would make a British person British?". Their responses varied—some pointed to origin or DNA, others to more affective notions such as "our sun" (metaphorically understood as "hope" in Kurdish traditions), love, struggle, or soul. Each of these answers carries weight. Nonetheless, the actual answer to the riddle is language.

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